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Research Article

Effects of Virtual vs. Blended Instruction on the Development of Oral/Aural Skills and Language Learning Motivation of Iranian Upper-Intermediate EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Recent technological advancements have significantly impacted various aspects of human life, including education, leading to the introduction of new trends in teaching methodology. This study explores the effects of virtual and blended instructional strategies on the academic performance and motivation levels of upper-intermediate Iranian EFL students. To achieve the intended objectives, a quasi-experimental explanatory sequential mixed methods design was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies for data collection and analysis. Sixty participants were selected from language institutes and assigned to virtual, blended, and traditional teaching approaches. The findings highlighted the substantial and positive impact of the blended teaching strategy on both listening and speaking skills, as well as its significant effect on motivation. Conversely, the virtual approach showed some improvements in listening skills; however, its effect on speaking skills and motivation was not statistically significant. Qualitative analyses from interviews provided valuable insights into learners' experiences, emphasizing the importance of facilitative and autonomous instructional methods within technology-enhanced educational frameworks. This study underscores the need for a balanced approach that efficiently utilizes technology while preserving essential components of in-person social interaction in language education.

Introduction

Language proficiency comprises a complex set of competencies that include reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills (Brown, 2015; Webb, 2008). These skills are interrelated, with proficiency in one often enhancing capabilities in the others. For instance, reading proficiency supports writing, while listening proficiency facilitates speaking (Mochida & Harrington, 2006; Parreren, 1983; Webb, 2005). Numerous studies emphasize that listening and speaking skills are fundamental to the development of language components across various contexts (Hamouda, 2013; Nowbakht & Fazilatfar, 2019; Rafiei et al., 2019). Listening, for example, is an interactive interpretive process that requires prior knowledge and linguistic skills to decode messages (Krashen, 1985; Hamouda, 2013). Proficient listening is thus vital for EFL learners to communicate effectively and fluently (Pourhossein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

Given the importance of listening and speaking in language acquisition, teaching methods associated with these skills require significant attention. Recent technological advancements have enabled the integration of technology into language learning (Martin et al., 2016). However, the complexities of these skills—such as the use of colloquial language, reduced forms, performance variables, and the nuances of delivery (stress, rhythm, and intonation)—pose challenges during instruction (Brown, 2015; Hamilton, 2018; Kessler, 2018; Rahmavati, 2019; Wu, 2015). The development of these skills should leverage a balanced mixture of in-person and technology-enhanced pedagogical approaches, allowing each technique to fill gaps left by the other (Vandergrift, 2002). Online education aligns with educational goals, enhancing accessibility and overcoming barriers of time and space (Alvarado & Calderon, 2013; Estevez et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online education as a social distancing measure, which replaced traditional pedagogies (Zhou & Zhang, 2022).

However, a holistic analysis is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of online instruction compared to traditional approaches, recognizing the various benefits and drawbacks of each method in technology-assisted language learning. Consequently, blended learning emerges as a viable solution to address the complexities of language proficiency. Blended learning combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online resources and technology-driven tools (Zhou & Zhang, 2022), allowing educators to harness the strengths of both in-person and digital learning environments (Zhang, 2021).

This study addresses the paradigm shift initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted the global educational landscape. Since the outbreak, language education has transitioned to online learning approaches (Alipour, 2020; Zhang, 2021; Zhou & Zhang, 2022). This abrupt shift has introduced complications for both teachers and learners, particularly regarding technology familiarity and altered interaction dynamics. EFL teachers and students faced the challenges of adjusting to online contexts, with no specific guidelines on topics to cover in online classes or those suitable for autonomous learning. Therefore, this study investigates the effects of technology-assisted language instruction on the acquisition of listening and speaking skills and

learners' motivation among Iranian EFL students. The research aims to fill gaps in understanding the impact of online, blended, and traditional teaching methods on oral/aural skills development and learner motivation within the Iranian context.

Review of the Related Literature

The transformative power of technology has significantly changed various aspects of human life (Peeters, 2018). With the current digital and interconnected advancements, a crucial question arises: how can education evolve to keep pace with these changes? The dynamic and continuous evolution of technology presents both opportunities and challenges for educational institutions (Zhang, 2021).

The opportunities presented by technological advancements include increased access to multimedia content, growth in online course offerings, enhanced use of mobile devices with internet access, the development of social networks for learning and professional growth, and the exploration of digital games for autonomous learning experiences (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). However, these rapid changes also pose significant challenges. Educational institutions must update their teaching approaches and curricula to integrate technological innovations (Fransen, 2008). Furthermore, both teachers and students must navigate the complexities and potential issues arising from technology use (Zhou & Zhang, 2022). The pace of technological advancement often outstrips research efforts, leading to some devices becoming outdated before comprehensive studies can be conducted (Shi & Fan, 2021).

While the literature discusses the effects of technology on teaching and learning, only a limited number of empirical studies confirm the benefits of integrating technology (Attewell, 2005). Many studies are funded by technology companies, which can impact the validity and objectivity of the research findings (Hsu, 2021). Additionally, the slow pace of comprehensive research struggles to keep up with rapid technological evolution (Chinnery, 2006). Nevertheless, large-scale studies, such as Project RED, have provided valuable insights into the educational impact of technology, recommending strategic uses of digital tools in learning environments and highlighting the need for further exploration of their full potential (Project RED, 2010).

Motivation, a key element in second language learning, has garnered increased attention over the past few decades (Boo et al., 2015). Various models, such as Dörnyei's L2 motivational self-system and Gardner's socio-educational model, have been proposed to enhance understanding of learners' motivation (Dörnyei, 2009; Gardner, 2010). Despite millions of students enrolling in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010), the impact of these instructional approaches on learning motivation has been rarely studied. Rajaee Harandi (2015) noted that e-learning can positively influence students' motivation. However, there are few studies that emphasize the complex and multidimensional nature of the relationship between technology, teaching methods, motivation, and language learning outcomes (Aysu, 2022; Boo et al., 2015).

Numerous research studies have investigated the differences between online and face-to-face instruction, yielding mixed or contradictory

results. Some studies indicate that online instruction can be more effective (Bourelle et al., 2016; Khoshnud & Karbalaei, 2014; Mahmoudi Dehaki, 2017), while others find no significant difference or better performance in face-to-face classes (Ni, 2013). For instance, Ni (2013) conducted a comparative study on the performance of EFL learners in online versus face-to-face classes over two years and found that student performance was independent of the instructional method, although there were higher dropout rates in online classes. Khoshnud and Karbalaei (2014) reported significant language development in students who interacted online via social networking sites. Bourelle et al. (2016) found that online students outperformed their face-to-face counterparts, potentially due to timely formative feedback. Mahmoudi Dehaki (2017) noted improvements in listening abilities and more positive attitudes toward learning as a result of online video watching. Paul and Friginal (2018) explored the impact of social media on Chinese learners' writing, revealing different patterns of interaction and feedback. Peeters (2018) examined autonomous learning in online environments, enhancing social interaction and effective communication among learners. Rahmawati (2019) found that EFL learners preferred blended instruction, which positively affected their listening and speaking skills. Xu et al. (2019) demonstrated that technology-enhanced blended programs improved outcomes in English courses and enrollment-teacher ratios. Alipour (2020) reported that blended and online participants outperformed a control group in vocabulary improvement. Kohnke (2020) researched vocabulary learning apps and concluded that they significantly increased participants' motivation for vocabulary learning. Rombot (2021) observed an increase in reading comprehension scores following blended instruction, while Yudhana (2021) reported higher reading comprehension outcomes in a blended mode.

The existing literature reveals a scarcity of studies comparing different instructional approaches specifically regarding listening and speaking skills. Additionally, there is a limited focus on the effectiveness of blended instruction, particularly concerning online instructional modes. Few studies have also examined learners' motivation across different instructional methods. Therefore, this research aims to explore the effects of virtual, blended, and traditional instruction on Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' oral/aural skills and motivation. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. Do virtual and blended methods of teaching listening skills differ in their impact on Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' performance?
2. Do virtual and blended methods of teaching speaking skills differ in their impact on Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' performance?
3. Do virtual and blended methods of teaching listening and speaking skills differ in their impact on the motivation of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners?

Method

Research Design

The present study utilized a quasi-experimental explanatory sequential mixed methods design, allowing for the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

This approach facilitated data triangulation, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the research findings by emphasizing the mutually reinforcing nature of quantitative and qualitative data (Clark, 2011). This methodology aligns with Creswell's (2012) perspective on integrating diverse data collection and analysis techniques within a single study.

The independent variables included instructional lessons in listening and speaking, delivered through three different methods: virtual, blended, and face-to-face instruction. The dependent variables comprised the listening and speaking scores, as well as the motivation levels of the EFL learners.

Participants

Participants were selected from Iranian EFL learners enrolled at Zaban-Gstar and Aryan language institutes in Yazd, Iran. A total of 127 candidates participated in the selection process. To ensure a homogeneous sample, the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was administered to assess proficiency levels. Out of the candidates tested, 60 students were classified as upper-intermediate learners based on their OQPT scores (ranging from 40 to 50). Outliers were omitted from the analysis, ensuring that only the scores of the selected participants were considered.

The participants, aged between 16 and 22, included both male and female learners, and they were randomly assigned to three groups (20 participants each) for the experimental and control conditions. Additionally, demographic information was collected regarding their first language (L1), prior English studies, and experiences in English-speaking countries. This information was gathered through a demographic questionnaire administered alongside the OQPT. The homogeneity of the participants was confirmed, and all learners had been studying English for two to four years, with English considered a foreign language for them.

Instruments and Materials

This section outlines the research instruments used for data collection, along with their validity and reliability considerations.

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT)

The OQPT, consisting of 60 items, was administered to participants to determine their proficiency levels. The test was allocated 30 minutes for completion, and candidates scoring between 40 and 50 were classified as upper-intermediate learners. The OQPT served as an initial classification tool, with its validity supported by alignment with established language proficiency standards in previous research.

Listening and Speaking Tests

Listening and speaking tests were developed and administered at both the beginning and end of the term for the experimental and control groups to evaluate participants' performance and progress. The tests were adapted from the Touchstone Book and were collaboratively prepared by the researcher and treatment teachers. A pilot test with ten upper-intermediate students was conducted to identify potential issues affecting test results and scoring rubrics. The pilot study yielded valuable insights, leading to minor revisions of test items and scoring criteria. Content validity was established through the expertise of experienced teachers at the institutes. Reliability was assessed using internal consistency measures, resulting in

Cronbach's alpha values of 0.78 for the listening test and 0.85 for the speaking test.

Speaking Production Test

The speaking production test utilized a picture description task as both a pre-test and post-test. Participants were asked to create a short story based on three different pictures. All participant responses were recorded and analyzed for accuracy, complexity, and fluency. The test was designed to align with widely accepted language learning standards and curriculum goals to ensure content validity. Strong inter-rater reliability was established, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.89, indicating a high level of agreement between the scores assigned by different raters.

Listening Comprehension Test

The pre- and post-treatment listening test comprised four audio-based texts, each followed by five multiple-choice questions requiring test-takers to select the correct answer from three options. The difficulty levels of these listening tests were assessed, with item difficulty rates estimated at 47% and 52%. The topics included in the test were "Egypt Travel Guide," "Neither Lender nor a Borrower," "Black Friday," and "Chinese New Year." The audio monologues were provided to students via compact discs distributed by the institute. The reliability of the internal structure for the listening test was computed using Cronbach's alpha analysis, yielding a value of $\alpha = 0.87$.

Motivation Questionnaire

The Motivation-Attitudes Scale questionnaire, designed by Aysu (2020), was employed to assess participants' motivation. This instrument combined elements from Demir's (2005) Motivation-Attitude Questionnaire, Gardner's (2004) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery, and Genç İlter's (2009) study on the motivational effects of technology, along with modifications made by the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of 45 items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Totally Agree" (5) to "Totally Disagree" (1).

The Motivation-Attitudes Scale included five sub-scales:

1. Six statements assessing attitudes toward the English language.
2. Six statements exploring attitudes regarding learning the English language.
3. Seven items addressing attitudes toward learning about the target culture.
4. Ten items measuring motivation before and after the experiment.
5. Sixteen items concerning attitudes toward the use of technology in language learning.

Reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha analysis, yielding a value of $\alpha = 0.89$.

Interview

The researcher-developed semi-structured interview aimed at the full exploration of perceived experiences and perceptions of EFL learners who went through blended or virtual English classes. The structure of the interview was carefully formulated to include a set of six structured questions (as representing six sections of the questionnaire). Expert review confirmed the intended alignments and reduced biases. Construct validity was assured through the categorization of questions into sections that explored different aspects, thus allowing a comprehensive exploration of participant perceptions. Moreover, to maintain reliability, the interviewer had collaboration with some

experienced educators and instructors to ensure that the questions had interactions mode and could result in consistent revealing of participants' views.

Educational Material and Technological Tools

Experimental group participants used electronic devices, usually their cell phones, to access listening audios and record speaking exercises. The teacher prepared ten listening audios and speaking topics for the participants in all three groups during the treatment period. The online and blended group participants accessed them through online sources, while the face-to-face participants encountered the materials during the classroom sessions. The educational material, sourced from the Touchstone series by Cambridge University Press, existed in both online and print versions. It is worth mentioning that these versions were identical in terms of content and learning tasks.

Procedures

In order to select the intended participants, the OQPT was administered among the EFL learners studying at the upper-intermediate level in two of the language institutes in Yazd. The ones obtaining a score between 40 to 50 were chosen to participate in this research project (in line with the guidelines provided by the OQPT developers). Then, the selected participants were divided into three (two experimental and one control) groups based on the class timetables of the institutes (each class will be taken as a group). It is worth mentioning that some listening and speaking tests were designed by the researchers based on the contents which were covered during the course. Later, some pilot testing was carried out to check the difficulty level of the tests and their flaws (it was attempted to develop the tests with a similar difficulty level and minimum number of flaws).

After dividing the participants into the designed groups, all students were scheduled to take a listening and speaking pretest. The face-to-face, blended, and online classes were taught by the same instructor. Students, in all three conditions, were exposed to the same content and had the same learning objectives.

Students in the face-to-face classes received instruction in the classroom 4 hours a week for 10 weeks for a total of 40 hours of instruction, plus 4 hours for the mid-term and final exams. The class format included lectures, group activities, individual timed activities, in-class workshops, contests, games, presentations, and class discussions. The students in the online group were instructed to spend the same hours studying at the web-based learning management system of Touchstone. Each online unit had an instructional section, workbook exercises, video activities, interactive games, unit tests, and discussion forums. Students were required to go to the unit discussion forum to post a point and reply to other students' points, based on the instructions that the teacher would give in the site and forum. The students participating in blended-method sessions were exposed to the online instruction for 20 hours (ten sessions). The rest of the sessions were set for the students to attend face-to-face classes (in the language institute) in person.

One week after the last instructional session, the listening and speaking posttests were administered to the participants in the groups. Moreover, the motivation scale was delivered to the students in all groups at the last session of the treatments. However, at the posttest session, the interviews were conducted among five

virtual and five blended group participants to collect confirmatory results on motivation.

Results

The first research question was proposed to compare the effect of virtual and blended methods on the listening skill of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' performance. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the differences in pre-listening scores among the instructional groups. The mean pre-listening scores for the three instructional groups were as follows: Traditional (M = 8.30, SD = 2.56), Virtual (M = 7.70, SD = 2.49), and Blended (M = 8.15, SD = 2.91). The ANOVA revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in pre-listening scores among the groups (F (2, 57) = 0.276, P = 0.760). Moreover, the mean differences and associated confidence intervals further supported the lack of significant differences.

After the implementation of the intended treatments, the scores of the three groups on the listening post-test were compared by running another one-way between-group ANOVA. The EFL learners participating in the virtual (M = 9.05, SD = 2.82) and blended (M = 14.40, SD = 3.27) groups seemed to have higher grades in the listening post-test compared with those in the control group (M = 8.35, SD = 2.62). Table 1 demonstrates the significance of the difference between these three groups in listening post-tests.

Table 1

Multivariate Comparison of Listening Post-Tests in All Groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	438.100	2	219.050	25.781	.000
Within Groups	484.300	57	8.496		
Total	922.400	59			

As it is represented in Table 1, there was a significant difference in post-test scores of experimental and control groups in listening, F (2, 57) =25.781, $p \leq .000$ *(two-tailed)*. However, the mentioned table could not provide a two-by-two comparison between the groups to help identify the main different one. Therefore, a post-hoc comparison is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Multiple Comparisons of Listening Post-Tests in All Groups

Bonferroni						
(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
traditional	virtual	-.70000	.92176	1.000	-2.9737	1.5737
	blended	-6.05000*	.92176	.000	-8.3237	-3.7763
virtual	traditional	.70000	.92176	1.000	-1.5737	2.9737
	blended	-5.35000*	.92176	.000	-7.6237	-3.0763
blended	traditional	6.05000*	.92176	.000	3.7763	8.3237
	virtual	5.35000*	.92176	.000	3.0763	7.6237

As illustrated in Table 2, post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the blended instruction can significantly ($p \leq .000$) improve the listening performance of EFL learners compared to the other two groups. Moreover, the virtual treatment also could result in significant improvement compared to the control group ($p \leq .000$).

The second research question was proposed to compare the effect of virtual and blended methods on the speaking skill of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' performance. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the differences in pre-speaking scores among the instructional groups. The mean pre-speaking scores for the three instructional groups were as follows: Traditional (M = 9.45, SD = 2.96), Virtual (M = 8.75, SD = 3.62), and Blended (M = 9.05, SD = 2.99). The ANOVA revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in pre-speaking scores among the groups ($F(2, 57) = 0.239$, $p = 0.788$). Moreover, the mean differences and associated confidence intervals further supported the lack of significant differences.

After the implementation of the intended treatments, the scores of the three groups on the speaking post-test were compared by running another one-way between-group ANOVA. The EFL learners participating in the virtual (M = 10.70, SD = 2.65) and blended (M = 14.80, SD = 3.07) groups displayed higher grades in the speaking post-test compared with those in the control group (M = 9.75, SD = 3.02). Table 3 demonstrates the significance of the difference between these three groups in speaking post-tests.

Table 3

Multivariate Comparison of Speaking Post-Tests in All Groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	288.100	2	144.050	16.855	.000
Within Groups	487.150	57	8.546		
Total	775.250	59			

As it is represented in Table 3, there was a significant difference in post-test scores of experimental and control groups in speaking, $F(2, 57) = 16.855$, $p \leq .000$ *(two-tailed)*. However, the mentioned table could not provide a two-by-two comparison between the groups to help identify the main different one. Therefore, a post-hoc comparison is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Multiple Comparisons of Speaking Post-Tests in All Groups

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
traditional	virtual	-.95000	.92447	.925	-3.2304	1.3304
	blended	-5.05000*	.92447	.000	-7.3304	-2.7696
virtual	traditional	.95000	.92447	.925	-1.3304	3.2304
	blended	-4.10000*	.92447	.000	-6.3804	-1.8196
blended	traditional	5.05000*	.92447	.000	2.7696	7.3304
	virtual	4.10000*	.92447	.000	1.8196	6.3804

As illustrated in Table 4, post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the blended instruction can significantly ($p \leq .000$) improve the speaking performance of EFL learners compared to the other two groups. However, the virtual treatment could not result in significant improvement compared to the control group ($p = 0.925$).

The third question in the current research dealt with the effect of virtual and blended methods of instruction on the motivation of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. In order to compare the effect of each treatment on the motivation of the participants, a One-Way Between-Group ANOVA was used. The descriptive results obtained by conducting a one-way between-group ANOVA revealed that there was a difference between the scores of the blended ($M = 84.25$, $SD = 12.27$), virtual ($M = 51.00$, $SD = 17.51$), and traditional ($M = 53.50$, $SD = 20.13$) groups.

In order to discover the significance of the difference between the motivation scores of all groups, the numerical results on the comparison between the groups are provided in Table 5.

Table 5

Multivariate Comparison of Motivation Test Scores in All Groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	13715.833	2	6857.917	23.837	.000
Within Groups	16398.750	57	287.697		
Total	30114.583	59			

The numerical findings of Table 5 reveal that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups F (2, 57) =23.837, $p \leq .000$ *(two-tailed)*. However, the mentioned table could not provide a two-by-two comparison between the groups to help identify the main different one. Therefore, a post-hoc comparison is presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Multiple Comparisons of Motivation Scores in All Groups

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
traditional	virtual	2.50000	5.36374	1.000	-10.7307	15.7307
	blended	-30.75000*	5.36374	.000	-43.9807	-17.5193
virtual	traditional	-2.50000	5.36374	1.000	-15.7307	10.7307
	blended	-33.25000*	5.36374	.000	-46.4807	-20.0193
blended	traditional	30.75000*	5.36374	.000	17.5193	43.9807
	virtual	33.25000*	5.36374	.000	20.0193	46.4807

As illustrated in Table 6, post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the blended group ($p \leq .000$) significantly improved the motivation of EFL

learners compared to the other two groups. However, the virtual treatment did not result in significant improvement compared to the control group ($p = 1.000$).

In order to confirm the results obtained from the questionnaire, interviews were conducted with five participants from the blended group and five participants from the virtual group. The responses of the interviewees were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively.

During the interviews, blended group participants provided the interviewer with profound information regarding their experiences. They mentioned several benefits of in-person interaction. They highlighted that viewing classmates and instructors created a sense of community and belonging among them. Zahra from the blended group said, "I enjoyed the moments when we came together in class. The opportunity to meet my peers in person and discuss topics motivated me to be more participative."

A highly emphasized issue emerging from the blended group interviewees was the interactive nature of group discussions and activities. Mohammad, one of the members of the blended group, described in-person interactions as follows: "We had these heated debates in which we could share our ideas at that very moment. It was intellectually stimulating and motivating to listen to different perspectives and present our arguments."

The blended group participants also provided rich insights regarding their experiences. They mentioned benefits in the blending of virtual and face-to-face interactions, suggesting that this was one reason for their higher motivation. Often, they expressed that the combination of both modes created a unique and enriching learning environment. The following remark from Maryam in the blended group underlined the convenience of the virtual components complementing the face-to-face classes: "Having online resources and discussions in addition to our classroom sessions was fantastic. That allowed me to revisit topics that we had gone over in class, and I could even contribute to discussions outside of our scheduled meetings."

The flexibility afforded by blended learning was one of the most dominant themes mentioned by the participants in the blended group. According to Sima, another blended group interviewee, "The mix of virtual and in-person classes gave us flexibility. If I missed something in the online class, I knew I could catch it in the face-to-face classes. It reduced stress and helped me stay motivated."

Participants also highlighted how virtual components supported continuity beyond the classroom. Mohammad explained further: "We had these virtual study groups where we discussed our assignments even when we weren't actually there. It created a sense of ongoing engagement and kept me motivated to keep up with the coursework." The blended group interviewees also often referred to the diversity in learning experiences that this approach provided.

On the other hand, interviews with virtual group participants revealed a few common challenges. Some of the interviewees mentioned limited social interactions and feelings of isolation. Maryam, a participant in the virtual group, described it thus: "Being alone in my room during virtual classes made it harder to stay motivated. I missed the interactions and discussions we used to have in a physical classroom."

Technical issues also negatively impacted motivation for this virtual group. Arman, another virtual group interviewee, shared: "Sometimes my internet was not good, and I couldn't engage fully. The frustration with the technical problems led to me being less motivated."

These interview insights remarkably correspond to the results of the questionnaire. The higher motivation scores of the blended group participants can be explained by the positive aspects they mentioned during the interviews. Their descriptions of flexibility, continuity, and the dynamic nature of blended learning echo the higher reported motivation levels in the questionnaire responses.

The interviews of the participants, in a nutshell, support and further expand the quantitative results. The rich tapestry of their stories unveiled how different learning modalities within the blended approach satisfy different motivational dimensions. In fact, their oral testimonies point to the role of the blended approach in creating an engaging and supportive learning environment that contributes to their motivational level.

Such qualitative triangulation provides a far-reaching perspective in the investigation by adding depth and substance through these interview narratives to the findings from the questionnaires, capturing the lived experiences of participants. It allows for a deeper understanding of what exactly drives participants' motivation within a blended learning environment.

Discussion

This study was carried out to explore the effect of virtual, blended, and traditional instruction on Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' oral and aural skills, as well as their motivation. In this section, the obtained findings will be contextualized and interpreted in comparison with the existing literature. This study aligns with a blended-learning approach and its transformative potential, particularly when compared with previous studies. As found by Alipour (2020), the blended group demonstrated higher achievement compared to the traditional group, not only in listening but also in speaking. The combination of face-to-face and online elements, along with collaboration and various learning modes, has become a driver for enhanced language learning processes, as revealed in the interviews with Zahra and Mohammad. This supports the idea that a blend of traditional and virtual elements produces a dynamic learning environment for language acquisition.

Regarding motivation, the current study aligns with Dörnyei's (2009) multi-dimensional motivational perspective. The higher motivation level of the blended group is consistent with the literature on the social nature of learning and collaborative activities, as evidenced by the interviews with Zahra and Mohammad. This finding is also in line with the research of Rajaee Harandi (2015) and Rahmawati (2019), which highlights the motivational benefits of blended learning for language acquisition. In contrast, the virtual group reported difficulties related to feelings of isolation and technical problems, as noted by participants such as Maryam and Arman. This finding is consistent with the literature suggesting that purely virtual teaching may hinder social interaction and decrease motivation (Bourelle et al., 2016; Khoshnud & Karbalaei, 2014).

When comparing the results of the present study with those examining solely virtual instruction, the researchers found that the virtual group's performance in listening and speaking skills did not significantly differ from that of the traditional group. This aligns with Ni's (2013) observations regarding performance disparities between online and face-to-face EFL classes. Although the motivational scores of the virtual group did not differ significantly from those of the traditional group, this finding is inconsistent with the positive motivational results reported by Rajaee Harandi (2015). This discrepancy may be attributed to contextual factors and teaching methodologies that were uniquely different in this study. Qualitative insights from interviews reveal the complex nature of technology's effect on language learning. These findings emphasize the importance of context, instructional approaches, and the interplay between technology and human interactions. Complemented by the empirical evidence provided by the quantitative analysis, the qualitative component of this study offers a deeper understanding of motivational dynamics and enriches our comprehension of learners' experiences.

Conclusion

This research supports a balanced perspective on using technology to enhance learning. The current study reinforces the development of context-aware, pedagogically sound instructional designs facilitated by technology, fostering appealing and motivating learning environments. This research synthesizes quantitative results with qualitative insights, providing educators and institutions with a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of the impact of technology on language learning. It emphasizes thoughtful integration regarding the evolution of education in the digital era, with a view toward fostering an empowered, engaged, and motivated cohort of language learners.

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