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Author/s:

Almaki, M;Gruba, P

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Chapter 4

Conceptualizing Formative Blended Assessment (FBA) in Saudi EFL

Mansoor S. Almalki

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3214-9876>

Taif University, Saudi Arabia

Paul Gruba

University of Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter sets out a conceptual framework for the design and use of ‘blended assessments’ that seek to create formative activities that can be characterized by shifting modalities of presentation, variations in time and action, and moves from individual to group work. The study’s framing is built upon longitudinal participatory action research based on the research questions. In addition to auto-ethnographic observations, 13 Saudi participants—three course coordinators, seven instructors, and three students—were asked to participate in focus groups and individual interviews. Using qualitative data analysis software, three core characteristics of formative blended assessment were identified: (1) multi-modal activities, flexibility, and peer encouragement, for example, were seen to be an ‘advantage’; (2) alignment of pedagogies and assessment tasks were perceived in a ‘compatibility’ theme; and (3) the possibility of dishonest behaviors and administrative challenges were classed under ‘complexity’.

INTRODUCTION

In line with global trends, adopting blended approaches to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs in the Saudi higher education system have been met with a series of challenges that include, for example, lack of teacher training, a hesitancy to shift away from traditional pedagogies, and poor support for infrastructure (Al-Qahtani & Higgins, 2013). The integration of digital tools in face-to-face settings, nonetheless “has clearly emerged as the most promising use of technology for second language learn-

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ing” (Chapelle, 2016, p. xi). One key area of promise, the integrated use of technology in assessment practices to create ‘blended assessments’, has received little attention to date. Because of their alignment with current approaches in blended language learning; however, such assessments have the potential to be a powerful agent of innovation in the Saudi context: assessment practices, as has been argued, can truly drive the 21st century curriculum (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 2009).

Blended learning offers greater choice compared to other methods (Littlejohn and Pegler, 2007). Blended learning method can be an answer to the growing issues related to curriculum delivery, access and academic program quality (Picciano, 2009). Blending different approaches in the current teaching and learning programs in higher education can have positive outcomes and support university students with greater flexibility without any limitation of time and place (Vaughan, 2007). Blended courses are observed increasing student engagement in their learning, enhance teacher-student interaction and add flexibility in the curriculum through improvement opportunities. Students have a problem with taking greater responsibility for their learning, partly through gaining competency in the new technologies. Faculty members also find it hard to develop blended courses due to a lack of time, support and resources, and they also have to gain competency in ICT applications (Vaughan, 2007). For the institution, blended learning is an opportunity to expand educational boundary and reduce the problems currently arising.

The rationale for conducting this study is to investigate the characteristics of blended learning and to analyse the data and make recommendations to allow the advantages of ICT in blended learning in Saudi context. Currently, the traditional system is unable to respond, and there is insufficient time and commitment by the universities to plan and build for the future. Therefore, an initiative leading towards blended learning is promising. The chapter’s aim is look at the usefulness and influence of blended learning on teaching and learning. Therefore, in this chapter, the design and use of blended assessments are investigated in a study grounded in a key question: Situated in the Saudi context, what are the language course coordinators’, instructors’ and students’ understandings and preferences in the design of formative blended assessment tasks and activities for language learning programs?

BACKGROUND

This section reviews the literature on blended learning starting with the definition of blended learning. It highlights the area of innovation needed, and impetus for the innovation.

Definition of Blended learning

According to Mandl and Kopp (2006), blended learning is the felicitous combination of the benefits e-learning offers with the advantages of traditional face-to-face-learning settings. In other words, it is the combination of learning in class and learning online in formal education. In the literature, term blended learning is defined as hybrid, blended and mixed modes (Swan, 2009). Blended learning in this chapter refers to the notion that students generally attend face-to-face classes and have online access to the course content and activities.

Area of Innovation

It is important to discuss the nature of the curriculum and assessment of EFL in terms of the challenges that the instructors and course coordinators face. Some of the challenges in EFL education are the lack of student motivation, underachievement, poor pedagogical strategies, high stakes testing, and a lack of qualified or capable instructors.

In Saudi Arabia, English instructors can be classified into three groups: (a) native speakers, (b) bilinguals, and (c) instructors from Pakistan and India (Khan, 2011). The native speakers are generally considered less qualified because their credentials mainly involve passing CELTA or TESOL. Bilingual instructors usually originate from Egypt and other Arab countries. Despite the insights of Arab culture, bilingual instructors are often not effective because of their lack of motivation. Instructors from regions such as India and Pakistan are certified and are considered to be the most effective; however, they lack an understanding of the Arab culture, which affects their usefulness.

University-level English is poor in Saudi Arabia, particularly in terms of writing (McMullen, 2009). Learning English is difficult for students because of anxiety over the complexities of the language, which sometimes lead to a lack of motivation to improve their English language skills (Mohammed, 2011). EFL in primary, middle, and secondary schooling is important in Saudi Arabia. Students of EFL in Saudi Arabia at the college level have moved through an EFL curriculum that starts during the first years of primary school. Only 45 minutes a week is dedicated to English at primary school level. However, as the student progresses into intermediate and secondary levels, their EFL time allowance is increased to approximately four hours every week (Elyas & Picard, 2010).

Blended designs for assessment are significant in Saudi Arabia because the Saudi government is currently working on improving the education system, specifically in regard to the English proficiency of students. The attempt to improve the English proficiency of college students in Saudi Arabia is prioritized in Saudi because of the acknowledgment that proficiency in English is needed in order to be competitive in the increasingly globalized world (Elyas & Picard, 2010).

Despite the support of the government towards English education in the curriculum at the tertiary level, success has still not completely achieved (Khan, 2011). Some of the problems encountered by Saudi Arabian leaders include the lack of incorporation of IT in language education, lack of opportunities for language exposure in the target language of English, and a lack of experience of instructors and students in incorporating technology in the classroom (Khan, 2011; Mohammed, 2011). These barriers suggest a need for further policies and practices to address the improvement of English proficiency in college students.

Our search of the literature suggests that blended designs for assessment have never been examined within the context of Saudi Arabia, and there is a seeming lack of empirical research on how blended assessment operates in the EFL system. It is intended that the results of this study will provide new information on how the design principles of blended assessment may be applicable in EFL in college education in Saudi Arabia. An initial step, however, is to explore the language learning metaphors currently being used.

Blended assessments differ from traditional measures of language proficiency in number of ways. Unlike measures created in static 'paper and pencil' formats designed for a single use at a set point in time (e.g., Hill, 2012; Jamieson, 2011), blended assessments consist of variations in modality, time and action, as well as differences across individual and group work (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012). For example, whereas a traditional assessment would be presented on paper to test writing in class for an

individual student, a blended design would allow the student to write collaboratively with others through a networked online tool for the length of term project. Given that project-based language learning prepares students for complex future work (Dooly & Sadler, 2016), it is now clear that a focus on blended assessment designs are required to spur innovation.

Based on experience in Saudi higher education, we argue that there is strong demand for not only for technology integration but also for assessment practices that offer reliable, tamper-free evaluations of the language proficiency. Indeed, from our perspective, there appears to be an increasing need in Saudi Arabia for assessments of language proficiency that can be productively used for the purposes of institutional enrolment, employment, and other certification purposes.

Impetus for the Innovation

Work on the principled design, use and revision of blended assessment is needed for three reasons: (1) improved recognition of new literacies abilities amongst contemporary students to prepare them for 21st century work (Kress, 2009; Motteram, 2016); (2) constructive alignment with prevailing global trends in technology integration (Horizon Report, 2017); (3) clearer focus and development of language teacher capabilities (Haines, 2016).

According to this chapter, reflecting on various theories of innovation implementation can help provide explanations for shortcomings of pre-existing practices in Saudi Arabia. For example, this chapter believes there are significant barriers to ensuring uniformity and standardisation of assessment practices, and one of these barriers is the absence of enforced regional, state, and national guidelines for language assessment. Without these guidelines and the enforcement of any overarching protocol for assessment of language, the classroom instructor is left with almost no framework. In some circumstances, heads of department may offer leadership in this area. However, not very often than in our experience, the classroom instructor is left unchecked (and unaided) in the instruction and assessment of language.

While innovations such as blended assessment offer new ways to evaluate students' competence in language, these interventions also provide evaluation of the competence of instructors of language. Some instructors may consider this threatening. However, this chapter can only see such reform as positive, and through this chapter, this chapter aims to indicate this.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

The framing of this chapter is built upon longitudinal participatory action research based primarily on qualitative accounts investigating core characteristics of formative blended assessment in technology-enhanced language learning within its real-life context from the participants' perspective. In purely quantitative studies, participants have more opportunity to reveal their thoughts and feelings through qualitative methods, such as interviews, than by simply ticking boxes in a questionnaire, especially since participants' thoughts are "unobservable construct" which is difficult to measure quantitatively (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011, p. 193). Thus, in order to look at the nature of students to address the research questions, qualitative data were gathered through auto-ethnographic observations, focus group and interviews to provide potentially rich data. One of the main aims of applying a qualitative approach in the study is to explore and understand the blended learning assessment process. It also helps to interpret the outcomes to build, as Creswell (2013) puts it, a holistic picture based on the researchers' interpretations and the

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participants' views about the phenomenon to find answers to the research questions. Another aim for using qualitative methods in the study is to obtain an 'inside view of the phenomenon, getting as close as possible to the subject of the research to collect resonant, fertile data' (Walliman, 2005, p. 247).

In addition to auto-ethnographic observations, the study presented in this chapter asked thirteen Saudi participants – three course coordinators, seven instructors and three students – to participate in focus groups and individual interviews. Using qualitative data analysis software, the study identified three core characteristics of formative blended assessment: (1) multi-modal activities, flexibility, and peer encouragement, for example, were seen to be an 'advantage'; (2) alignment of pedagogies and assessment tasks were perceived in a 'compatibility' theme; and (3) the possibility of dishonest behaviors and administrative challenges were classed under 'complexity'. Taken together, these themes represent a conceptual point of departure for the ongoing development in blended approaches that highlights the integration of technology and assessment in Saudi language programs.

Participants Selection

The first step in recruiting participants was to determine their suitability and readiness to proceed through all the study. The study deemed this as important and necessary so that they could get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being investigated, and from all possible relevant perspectives. Moreover, the study tried to make sure that potential participants had experience with technology in language teaching (for the course coordinators and instructors) and experience with language assessment (for the students). For the ease of data collection, it was also imperative for the authors as researchers to consider the students' language proficiency. Therefore, those who seemed to be advanced in language proficiency (to the extent that they would be able to be interviewed in English) were invited to participate.

A total number of ten staff members and three students showed personal and professional interest in participating in this study. The participants were divided into three distinct groups of course coordinators, instructors, and students because, as this study was initiating innovation, it was imperative to consider the viewpoints of all stakeholders, as these viewpoints might differ in some ways. The course coordinators are the managers, the instructors are the facilitators, and the students are the end users of the learning system.

Procedure

This study started the data collection by inviting potential participants to join the study. The study asked a selected number of potential participants to fill out entry surveys and provide demographic and other related information. The aim of this procedure was to identify the suitability and appropriateness of the potential participants to join to the study. Having handed out the surveys, the study discussed the questions and made sure they were understood, especially by the BA students.

Thirteen participants (7 instructors, 3 course coordinators, 3 students) completed the entry surveys and showed readiness to participate in the study. The entry surveys were collected from the participants over three days.

The semi-structured interviews took place at a Saudi university at different times. These interviews took more time to complete than the previous stage because all participants were engaged in their teaching/studying responsibilities and their schedules had to be accommodated to avoid possible disruptions to their activities. All instructors and students were invited to come to the office allocated for this study,

which was convenient for all of them. The course coordinators asked the authors to come to their workplace for interviewing them as they found this easier with their schedules.

Each participant was asked questions relating to blended learning and blended assessment conceptualizations and perceptions; in particular, about the language skills that they thought should be assessed in EFL using blended assessment. Participants noticeably preferred the productive skills of English (speaking and writing). This is connected to the fact that most of the study participants raised the cheating issue as an ongoing factor that may hinder the effectiveness of BA in their institution. They believed that in speaking and extended writing it would be easier for instructors to determine the validity of the assessment. Also, after initial assessment in these areas, instructors would have some idea of their students' performance levels and their level of English, and so cheating opportunities in assessing speaking and writing online would be limited.

Data Analysis

The set of three “innovation initiation” characteristics that are set out in Rogers and Shoemaker (1971, p. 15) were adopted as our central framework for analysis:

1. **Relative advantage:** the degree to which blended designs for assessments are perceived as better than the designs they are replacing.
2. **Compatibility:** the degree to which blended designs for assessments are perceived as consistent with existing values and past experiences, and able to meet the needs of potential adopters.
3. **Complexity:** the degree to which blended designs for assessments seen to be difficult to understand and use.

Using this core framework, a thematic analysis of the qualitative data with the goal of identifying patterns and trends (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2012) were conducted. After a series of analytical iterations, four main themes emerged: (a) multi-approach, (b) encouragement, (c) formative assessment, and (d) challenges.

FINDINGS, SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section both presents findings and discusses them based on the related literature. As shown in this section, the Multi-approach theme contains the most clusters, as well as the second greatest number of coded examples (18). The greatest number of coded examples falls under the Encouragement theme (19), followed by Multi-approach (18), Formative assessment (16) and Challenges (8). In the table, Relative Advantage, Compatibility and Complexity are listed as types of innovations likely to enhance or reduce the possibility of adoption.

Relative Advantage of Blended Assessments

According to Rogers and Shoemaker (1971), the ‘relative advantage’ of an innovation occurs when stakeholders see that the proposed change, if implemented, will be preferable to what it will be replacing. In Saudi context, study participants indicated that blended assessments could be better than current

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Table 1. Multi-faceted nature of blended assessment

| Factor | Definition | Sample data |
|---------------|---|--|
| Integration | Traditional and online approaches are merged. | "Blended [learning and assessment] means when we blend two types of approaches to teach and where we provide such a nice atmosphere where we blend and we present a very cosy and harmonious atmosphere of learning to the students" (Soliman, interview 7). |
| Learner focus | Assessment design is grounded in perceived student needs. | "Things are moving from [a] traditional or teacher-centred classroom to [a] student or learner-centred classroom, giving autonomy to the students or the learners to take initiative" (William, interview 2). |
| Novelty | New ideas and approaches are implemented in EFL assessment tasks. | "This is a new concept and most of the teachers, especially who are teaching in the EFL situation, now they are fully obsessed with the idea of blended approaches" (Jack, interview 1). |

approaches if designs were multifaceted and included considerations of technological integration, learner focus, and conceptual novelty (Table 1).

A majority of the participants defined blended designs for learning and assessment as the mixing or integration of two approaches, face-to-face instruction and online instruction. Soliman, an EFL instructor, defined blended learning assessment in terms of the mixing of traditional and modern approaches to meet the learning needs of students. He said, "as the name is really suggestive, so blended approaches mean when we blend two types of approaches to teach and where we provide such a nice atmosphere where we blend and present in a very cosy and harmonious atmosphere of learning to the students" (Soliman, interview 7). As indicated by their perceptive and deductive extrapolations of the meaning of blended approaches, a lack of formal exposure to the core concepts and foundations of blended assessment points to the fact that it is seen as new and innovative concept to ESL instructors in this context.

The second theme, encouragement, pertains to ways in which blended assessments may help motivate students to be more involved in their studies of English. Factors which encourage students to be better motivated include interactivity, the possibility of feedback, and the availability of resources to students (Table 2).

Table 2. Encouragement as a relative advantage

| Factor | Definition | Sample data |
|-------------|---|---|
| Interactive | Refers to the interactive nature of blended assessment. | "Outside of class it's even better; it also gives them opportunities to practice English with other people" (Ali, interview 8). |
| Feedback | Refers to the feedback that students receive from blended assessment. | "I send what is called the feedback along with the result to the students" (Sami, interview 4). |
| Resources | Refers to the availability of resources useful to students. | "I think the technology is providing a lot of resources" (William, interview 2). |

Blended assessment was perceived to be interactive. It was seen as providing students with the opportunity to relate with ease and facility to their own and other instructors. Interactivity can also be achieved even when students are alone because students can utilize technological programs that allow them to practice language though them as if they are interacting with another person. Ali, an EFL in-

structor, believes that a blended approach, being interactive, is attractive to students: “Outside of class it’s even better; it also gives them opportunities to practice English with other people” (Ali, interview 8). The potential alluded to here is congruent with what Egbert (2005) and Egbert and Hanson-Smith (2007) wrote as three essential components of successful computer-assisted learning initiatives, which are: learners need opportunity to interact and negotiate meaning, they need to be able to interact with authentic audiences, and they need to be involved with authentic tasks.

Feedback was also singled out as a possible motivating factor for students to participate in blended assessment. The blended assessment approach allows for a more convenient way for instructors to provide feedback as a result of the available technology. In face-to-face instruction feedback can frequently occur as a natural consequence of interaction between instructors and students. Despite the perceived ease of providing feedback as a result of online components of blended assessment, some concerns were raised. Adam expressed concerns about the informality of some technological platforms in providing feedback stating, “I consider it a little too informal if it would be through blogs and all that. But if it is acceptable with the institution, then, yeah, it’s fine” (Interview 9).

Blended assessment also offers extensive resources wherein independent learning can be developed and encouraged. Isaac, an EFL instructor, explained that the internet provides a global platform for students in which the available information seems limitless; with that students are provided with the opportunity to be exposed to more variety and increased knowledge. Overall, the results of this theme suggest that blended assessment can not only be useful in improving the language assessment of students, but it can also be effective in assisting students to become more engaged in assessment tasks in class.

Multi-Approach

The participants stated that they understood and preferred designs of formative blended assessment tasks as a multi-approach view of language learning, encompassing the elements of integration and innovation. This is consistent with recent findings on blended and classroom-based assessment (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012).

In the review of the themes emerging from the analysis of the transcripts, evidence indicates that apart from their views on defining blended assessment, both instructors and students have similar preferences and understanding concerning formative blended assessment. The elements associated with formative blended assessment tended to be articulated in a manner consistent with the available literature on classroom-based assessment and blended language assessment (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012; Harris et al., 2009; Hill & McNamara, 2012).

Integration

Blended learning assessment can be described as being about integration in that it involves the delivery of the language assessment tasks through both traditional and online means. This is the subject of a large number of studies on improving blended learning environments (Al-Qahtani & Higgins, 2013; Jia, Chen, Ding, & Ruan, 2012) and becoming mainstream in language assessment in blended delivery (Garrett, 2009, Levy, 2009; Oxford & Jung, 2007).

It would have been easy for the participants to have said that they didn’t like the traditional forms of assessment and instead they wanted new ways of assessing, based on technology and the use of com-

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puters – but this is not what they said. They want both. They could see the value in past, older forms of assessment, and they could also see the potential benefits of what technology has now made possible.

Innovation

As well as integration, the findings indicated that innovation is a significant preference in multi-approach blended designs. Innovation typically goes hand in hand with multimodality, and Garrett (2009) uses the word *innovation* to describe creative communication strategies that use technology. A similar notation can be found in a study conducted by Gruba and Hinkelman (2012), who refer to *multimodal* being part of blended assessment. These authors signify the rising trend of using new technologies, and the innovative developments in how these are used.

Innovation in assessment, which refers to innovative responses in the face of continuous change, is a necessary aspect of blended assessment. Chen and Kessler (2013) highlighted the value of innovation in noting the increasing use of media to be prominent in accessing the course modules and the various preferences students' exhibited in knowledge access. Deng and Carless (2010) questioned practices of incorporating innovation into assessment, noting that the examination remains the predominant pedagogy in non-English speaking societies. This tallies with the findings in this research, where the participants supported the use of traditional forms of assessment, but also embraced the innovative changes enabled by technological developments.

The participants stated that they understood and preferred designs of formative blended assessment tasks that offered relative advantages over conventional strategies. In understanding the context of the beliefs and ideologies of the course coordinators, instructors, and students on formative blended assessment in language learning, it was apparent that the participants were generally very optimistic about the potential of utilizing formative blended assessment in language learning. They saw benefits in this means of assessment and they appreciated the encouragement and collaboration that they perceived as going hand in hand with formative blended assessment in language learning. It was possible to presume from the participant responses that the perceived *benefits* of blended assessment for EFL instruction could serve as motivational factors driving the design of the blended assessment curriculum in the institution.

Benefits

The benefits of blended learning and assessment attracted much attention among educators as well as students who were exposed to these learning modalities. These perceived benefits include improvement of communication between instructors and students, more effective methods of teaching technical skills to students, and the provision of assistance to instructors. These findings are consistent with the commentary on the themes of benefits, found in previous studies (Jamieson, 2011), and encouragement (Harris et al., 2009).

Encouragement and Collaboration

The participants stated that there were greater opportunities to exploit the relative advantage of increased potential for collaboration – where course coordinators, instructors and students all contribute to the assessment design. These comments tended to be consistent with what has been previously known concerning the role of communication in blended assessment. Thus, the responses gathered tend to support

the proposition that the development of collaboration among participants in blended assessment needs greater emphasis (Graham, 2009).

Some of the participants inferred that as communication competency improves so does the collaborative learning experiences of the EFL students. They added that in blended assessment systems the students are motivated to participate in online interactions, which provide the students more opportunity to articulate their thoughts in written form.

In terms of encouragement, the responses from the participants stressed the motivational influence of formative blended assessment. The majority of the comments inferred that it was the interactive possibilities of online software for assessment that led to increased desire and satisfaction with the assessment and learning experience. It was for these reasons that the concepts of encouragement and collaboration have been grouped together as a sub-category of the purported relative advantages of formative blended assessment (FBA).

The responses of the participants are not surprising and reflect the tenets of both contemporary EFL theory and motivational theory. For example, concerning the latter, the defining feature of formative assessment is that task and feedback occur at a time when the student (and instructor) still has ample opportunity to rectify unsatisfactory language learning performance. Motivation and encouragement are noticeably higher when the individuals perceive that their effort actually affect a particular outcome (Harris et al., 2009). Thus, the synergy between greater opportunity for socialisation and feedback appears to increase positive perceptions of FBA.

Compatibility of Blended Assessments

In line with Rogers and Shoemaker (1971), the compatibility of an innovation occurs when a proposed change is perceived as being consistent with existing values and past experiences. If a characteristic of an innovation is that it is considered to be compatible, then it is more likely to reach the implementation phase of an innovation; here, participants expressed ways that they could imagine new assessment regimes merging into their existing views of classroom proficiency measurements.

Table 3. Defining formative assessment practices

| <i>Factor</i> | <i>Definition</i> | <i>Sample data</i> |
|---------------|---|--|
| Progress | Refers to the progress in student learning as a result of formative assessment. | <i>“Students also must be knowing that, okay this is how much I have done and this is what I’m supposed to work on now”</i> (Jack, interview 1). |
| Tests | Refers to the use of tests during assessment. | <i>“Having exams”</i> (Omar, interview 13). |
| Measure | Refers to the achievement measured in formative assessment. | <i>“Teachers and students must be knowing what’s going on there and how much they have learned so far in my classroom”</i> (Jack, interview 1). |

Many of the participants perceived blended assessment as a way to examine the learning progress of students. Adam explained the rationale for determining the progress of students by saying, “If your students are making progress [then you learn] how best you can help” (Interview 9). According to Kader, assessment should assist in checking the students’ rate of progress or learning.

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As in the previous comments, the facilitation of enhanced means of collecting data concerning student progress is a central theme in the reports by Russell and Airasian (2012). Another way in which blended assessment was understood by the participants was as a means of measuring the achievement of students. The focus of measuring a student's achievement was on examining if students learn what they are supposed to learn according to the curriculum. Isaac explained that, "It's done according to a standard evaluation tool. For example, here the standard for evaluation, the expectations for evaluating the students have been made clear to us by the university" (Interview 10). Blended assessment gives instructors a more dynamic approach to measure the achievement of students because of the available tools in online approaches.

Some participants like Turki and Omar view blended assessment as merely tests or exams, failing to recognize the reason behind such tests. There seems to be a difference between how instructors and students perceive blended assessment. Instructors tend to have a more rounded view of blended assessment and tend to see blended assessment as an opportunity to not only track the progress of students in a meaningful and accurate way, but also to measure their achievement. Among students, however, formative assessment was typically perceived as simply tests.

As well as viewing formative blended assessment as being a multi-approach system and offering relative advantages, the participants stated that they understood and preferred designs of formative blended assessment tasks that were compatible with the goal of encouraging learning. Moreover, the participants' responses suggested that regardless of modality, formative assessment is designed to check students' performance. The concept of compatibility refers to the role of formative assessment in checking the performance of students for the greater purpose of ensuring that learning can be maximised. This is the main principle of formative assessment.

The participants associated their conceptions of the design of formative blended assessment tasks with several forms of context specific challenges and issues involving government and educational institution feedback. These themes were found to be consistent with studies of Saudi educator training (Al-Hazmi, 2003). Curriculum delivery issues mentioned by the participants that were consistent with the literature included ethics in learning standards (Liang & Bonk, 2009), authenticity, and reliability (Chapelle, 2008).

Complexity of Blended Assessments

Complexity characteristics, according to Rogers and Shoemaker (1971), are of concern when stakeholders see a possible innovation as user-friendly, and it is perceived as easy to understand and use. The fourth theme, challenges, refers then to the different challenges that instructors or students may experience in blended assessment. This theme was relevant because it provided insights into what affects instructors when they plan blended learning and assessment. Some of the perceived challenges include gaining facility in using technology, distraction from the availability of information and resources, and a lack of administrative support. Table 4 contains all the main clusters that emerged from the theme challenges.

Table 4. Challenges

| <i>Factor</i> | <i>Definition</i> | <i>Sample data</i> |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Facility | Refers to the necessary training needed to implement blended assessment. | <i>"I personally believe, if you use these machines in the classroom you should be well trained and you have to be very, very judicious"</i> (Jack, interview 1). |
| Distraction | Refers to blended assessment as a possible source of distraction. | <i>"Some of the students are playing with the gadgets"</i> (Jack, interview 1). |
| Administrative support | Refers to the lack of administrative support in implementing blended assessment. | <i>"Sometimes in the classroom and certain language labs the computers are available but we just [use them] when it comes to reading and writing, just to test their reading and writing ability and progress"</i> (Kader, interview 6). |
| Monitor | Refers to the need for monitoring to prevent cheating. | <i>"Nobody is monitoring them. But if there should be some ground rules that this is a test in a way, so you don't do this, you don't do that"</i> (Adam, interview 9). |

Not having the appropriate skills to implement and use the ‘machines’ involved in blended language assessment can be a challenge both for instructors and students. Soliman explained the significance of having training and facilities in using technology within the context of blended assessment. Soliman noted the need for a basic knowledge in using computers given that technology plays a major role in many aspects of the way of living of people today:

Soliman: *"They must have some sort of knowledge about the bandwidth in the fast internet connection if they are slow so[or] they will get disconnected after two or three or four minutes, so it will not be good for them"* (Interview 7).

Without the proper knowledge or facility in using computers, students may lose their motivation, which can have a negative impact on their learning:

R: *"Just that they won't use it?"*

Soliman: *"Yes, de-motivation. So they must be able to use it, they must be able to know how the system works and if they don't have this much, they may go for short training in computer technology"* (Interview 7).

A difference can be gleaned from the responses of the participants on the whole compared to earlier studies into blended approaches. While the participants of this study appeared to be primarily concerned with operating information technology systems, the participants of previous studies appear to have been more concerned with attaining/accessing state of the art technology (Levy & Stockwell, 2006).

The lack of administrative support in the use of technological equipment can also be a challenge in a successful implementation of blended assessment system. Instructors need support and proper training in using the technology, especially in the early stages of developing programmes which use computers. The educational institution also needs to be able to provide the tools and the equipment needed to implement the curriculum within a blended learning system. Students may also need administrative support to gain facility in using technology.

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Distraction as a result of the availability of different programs and technological systems can be a challenge in blended approaches. Without proper monitoring, both instructors and students can deviate from the goals of blended assessment, resulting in educational goals not being achieved. Sultan noted that blended approaches can be useful in getting the attention of students, but instructors need to be careful in ensuring that the attention of students is on the right topic:

“My opinion [is] that it is good to get attention, good to make the studies more interesting and to get them involved and there are chances that students may detract or distract sometimes, but if the teacher is attentive and he himself knows these techniques, he can better teach – instead of teaching in a traditional way” (Interview 3).

The previous comments of Sultan highlight a problem, but also infer a potential solution for the issue. While the use of online media presents a problem of potential online distraction to students, one means for the teacher to address this issue could be to navigate the online assessment components prior to their session with the students in order to detect distractions. For example, there may be situations where students need to type in a new URL or search for a particular word using a search engine. This is the time when students are most likely to be distracted. Thus, through teacher preparation, distractions can be decreased. Also, as highlighted by Sultan, there is a need for diligent monitoring of student use of online components in any assessment program. Authors such as Levy and Stockwell (2006) and Egbert et al. (2011) state that it is the teacher that makes the difference in the context of language learning, and not the technology. This highlights the important role a teacher can play to implement the technology successfully.

Some instructors prefer a more proactive approach in addressing cheating by monitoring the activities of students. Instructors believed that they and the course coordinators should be given a means of monitoring possible cases of dishonesty, in the face of the freedom that students have to access technology. The lack of structured monitoring to detect the cheating in blended assessment indicates the need for instructors to have the initiative to monitor cheating in their own ways. Formative blended assessment leads to changes in how instructors practice the teaching profession. Primarily these changes come about because of the use of technology in assessment, and because such use requires the provision of feedback, administrative support, competency of instructors both in teaching and management of technology, and the overall sustainability of the practice of using this new assessment modality.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Following are details of some of the significant implications for practice confronting instructors engaged in formative blended assessment:

Instructors will be under increasing surveillance to ensure that their assessment plans match the prescribed curriculums of their institutions. This will be an important quality standard measure as increasingly automated systems of assessment lead to more scrutiny of teaching and learning. With the increase in uniformity of assessment practices using a range of media there will also be a need for teachers to provide feedback that is more uniform from class to class. Differences in instructor to student feedback, and feedback from class to class, will be more noticeable. One stark implication of an increase in the application of formative blended assessment regimes is that education providers intending on implementing

these programs will need to be equipped with the appropriate hardware and software to conduct these assessments. One of the challenges for both formative blended assessment scheme designers and the instructors themselves who are required to implement these programs will be ensuring that the outcome programs are able to achieve an optimal level of integration between different means of information exchange. More importantly, an implication of blended systems is that designers and teachers must be able to apply innovative means to encourage assessment and learning.

A further implication of formative blended assessment regimes is that a supporting environment is required. Such a climate of endorsement will require support from the most senior executives directing the education institution for unit coordinators, lecturers, and tutors. One specific example of change may involve how, in the past, students were required to keep paper-based learning diaries. Such diaries may be replaced by digitalised learning diaries, and these diaries could be made part of the formative blended assessment regime. Thus, there will be greater pressure on teachers and administrators to encourage the use of information technology in language assessment.

CONCLUSION

Three main characteristics of formative blended assessment were identified in this study, namely advantages, compatibility and complexity. Blended learning assessment has advantages enhancing multi-modal activities, flexibility and peer encouragement, as well as being aligned with 21st century pedagogies and assessment tasks. However, it is a complex structure with challenges, but overall it has the potential to play a part in language teaching and learning in tertiary education in Saudi Arabia.

The participants' views are indicators of their acceptance of formative blended assessment into new learning and teaching environment, and their reflections on aspects of blended learning assessment are a useful indicator for curriculum designers using technology multimedia in language teaching and learning. Furthermore, the participants indicated that blended assessments could be better than current approaches if designs were multifaceted and included considerations of technological integration, learner focus, and conceptual novelty

This chapter presented that blended assessments can help motivate students to be more involved in their learning process and get more constructive feedback through the available technology along with participating in online interactions, which provide the students more opportunity to articulate their thoughts. It also showed that multi-approach blended assessment design has benefits such as integration, innovation, encouragement and collaboration, and compatibility.

Overall, the results suggest that blended assessment can not only be useful in improving the language assessment of students, but it can also be effective in assisting students to become more engaged in assessment tasks in class. It is also apparent that the participants in the study were generally very optimistic about the potential of utilizing formative blended assessment in language teaching and learning.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Blended Assessment: It is a type of assessment differing from traditional assessment and unlike paper and pencil formats as well as including collaborative and individual work.

Blended Learning: The notion that students generally attend face-to-face classes and have online access to the course content and activities.

Collaboration: A kind of work where course coordinators, instructors and students all contribute to the assessment design.

Formative Assessment: The task and feedback occur at a time when the student (and instructor) still has ample opportunity to rectify unsatisfactory language learning performance.

Innovation: Using technology for creativity, for example, implementing blended assessment when measuring students' writings or tasks.

Integration: It involves the delivery of the language assessment tasks through both traditional and online means.

Multi-Approach: Encompassing the elements of integration and innovation.