

USE OF BLENDED LEARNING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS IN NATIONAL AND EXTRA COUNTY SCHOOLS IN WESTERN REGION, KENYA

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine the use of blended learning in learners' acquisition of English language skills in national and extra-county schools in Western region, Kenya. The main study objective was to determine the use of blended learning in enhancing learners' acquisition of English language skills in national and extra-county schools in Western region, Kenya. The theoretical basis of the study was Social Constructivism and Connectivism. The study sample was 343 Form 3 students; 32 English teachers; 16 principals of national and extra county schools; 4 County Quality Assurance and Standards Officers and 2 Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development language specialists. The study sample was 397 respondents selected through simple random, cluster and purposive sampling techniques. The study design adopted was Descriptive Survey. Data was collected through an interview schedule, questionnaire, written task and observation. The data was analyzed using SPSS. The study findings showed that the schools which used blended learning more frequently recorded an improved performance in the acquisition of specific language skills, which shows that the use of blended learning positively influences the learners' acquisition of these skills. The study recommends that the key technologies for the use of blended learning and their frequent use should be encouraged so as to change the attitudes, beliefs and opinions of teachers and learners towards blended learning since their perception towards the use of these platforms directly influences learners' acquisition of reading and writing skills in English.

Keywords: Blended learning; key technologies, language skills, web-based and social media platforms.

1. INTRODUCTION

The current trends in globalization have seen modern technology seep into the classroom and redefine the entire teaching and learning process (EdSys, 2020). Globalization, according to Carnoy (1999) who analyzes how it has been affecting education systems directly and indirectly mentions some of the following major educational changes; there has been greater emphases on Mathematics and Science curricula, English as a foreign language and communication skills in school education and the use of information technology, such as, the use of the Internet and computer assisted instruction are becoming more common in the classroom.

Since the onset of the pandemic in late December 2019, the education systems world over were almost thrown into disarray, following the unprecedented closure of all educational institutions, save for the developed nations in which learning was not interrupted as much, thanks to digitalized education. In developed nations such as South Korea, China, Singapore, online education programs kept schooling going while students stayed at home with e-learning (Yiwei, 2020). In response, many schools have moved online and some parents are fast becoming savvy with resources created for home-schoolers to cause minimal disruption to their children's education (Vidisha, 2020). The Covid-19 crisis was an eye-opener, that led to a sharper focus on the potential of technology in delivering education and led to widespread adoption of technology as the default option. Even as the evidence so far remains mixed. Distance learning was launched in a number of countries, with both teachers and administrators essentially having to learn on the go. For instance, Education Ministries in Uganda, Nigeria and South Africa were providing multimedia and reading resources online while Kenya, Rwanda and Somali land were running Radio and TV programmes for continued learning. A number of EdTech start-ups like Zeraki in Kenya and Snapplify in South Africa were able to build audiovisual e-learning resources that students could access through mobile phone applications. However, due to a number of challenges, these efforts have not borne much fruit.

Another context of this study is learners' acquisition of language skills. Languages play a key role in Kenya's educational system, not only as important subjects but also as the mediums of instruction (Barasa, 2005). However, the performance of secondary school learners of languages especially English in National Examinations in Kenya has been an issue of great concern. According to the KCSE KNEC Report, the performance of candidates in English Paper 101/2 which tests reading skills and Paper 101/3 which tests writing skills is still unsatisfactory (KNEC, 2022). Hence, the issue of how English skills are acquired and used in the Kenyan school context is very important. Teachers are advised to devise adequate strategies for encouraging students to read a variety of materials and to adopt an integrated approach in the teaching and learning of English language in order to help learners acquire the relevant skills, attitudes and knowledge. (KNEC, 2022.)

In a nutshell, this study hopes to highlight the need to adopt the new modern and globally accepted approach in the teaching and learning of languages, more specifically, English in order to improve performance and at the same time help change the perspectives of teachers and learners towards technology integration in the teaching and learning process at high school. The purpose of this study was to determine the use of blended learning in learners' acquisition of English language skills in national and extra-county schools in Western region, Kenya. The main study objective was to determine the use of blended learning in enhancing learners' acquisition of English language skills in national and extra-county schools in Western region, Kenya.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study was Descriptive Survey. Saunders, et al. (2003) explain that Descriptive Survey design looks with intense accuracy at the phenomena of the moment and then describes precisely what the researcher finds out. Therefore, this design helped the researcher to gain a deeper insight into the use of blended learning and its influence on learners' acquisition of English language skills in national and extra-county schools in Western region, Kenya and precisely describe, accurately and adequately interpret the findings of the study. According to Mugenda & Mugenda, (2003) Descriptive survey also aims at reporting the conditions as they exist. In relation to this study, there was no intention to manipulate the variables under study. This study was based in Western region, Kenya (former Western province), which covers Bungoma, Busia, Kakamega and Vihiga counties. The study sample was 343 Form 3 students; 32 English teachers and Heads of Department; 16 principals of national and extra county schools; 4 County Quality Assurance and Standards Officers and 2 Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development language specialists. The study sample was 397 respondents selected through simple random, cluster and purposive sampling techniques. Data was collected through an interview schedule, questionnaire, written task and observation schedule validated by research specialists at the Curriculum and Pedagogy Department. The data was analyzed using SPSS and then organized into themes to corroborate the descriptive findings. For the purpose of analysis; the schools in the study were divided into High and Low Achievers' schools.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to assess the influence of use of blended learning on learners' acquisition of English language skills, the language teachers were asked how frequent the different web-based and social media platforms were used in classroom instruction generally and for the specific reading and writing skills. The findings were as follows: The most commonly used media platforms for both groups of respondents were ranked as follows: Most used- Google Meet (70%) and WhatsApp (56%); Zoom (18%) and Facebook (31%) were less used whereas the least used were Google Classroom (12%) and YouTube (13%) respectively as shown in Figures 1 & 2.

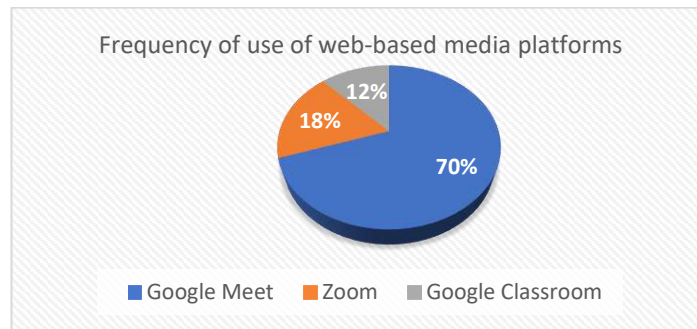


Figure 1: Frequency of use of web-based media platforms in classroom instruction

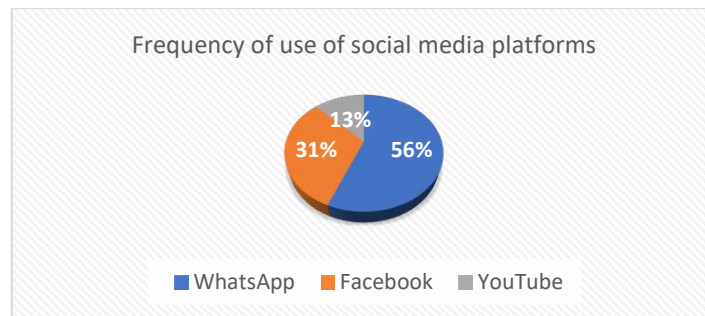


Figure 2: Frequency of use of social media platforms in classroom instruction

The figure 3 and 4 below show the frequency of usage of web-based and social media platforms for a variety of reading skills among the High Achievers' (HAS) and Low Achievers' schools (LAS), some reasons for this are also captured in the interview responses.

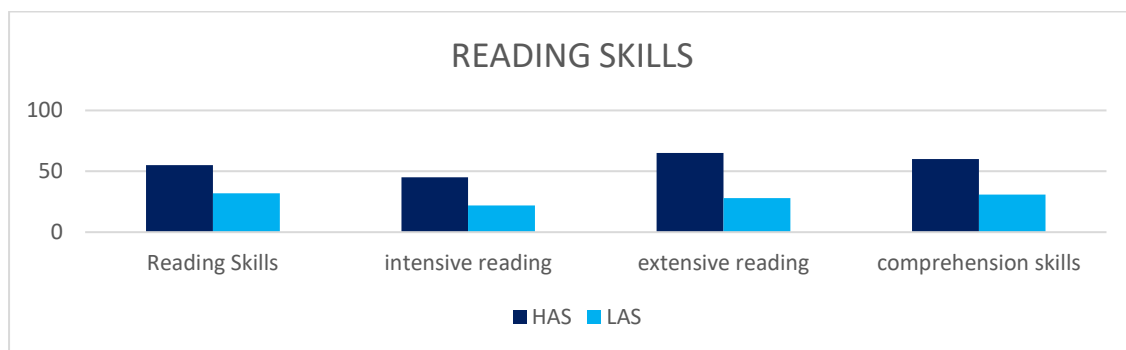


Figure 3: Frequency of use of WBSMP in classroom instruction of reading skills

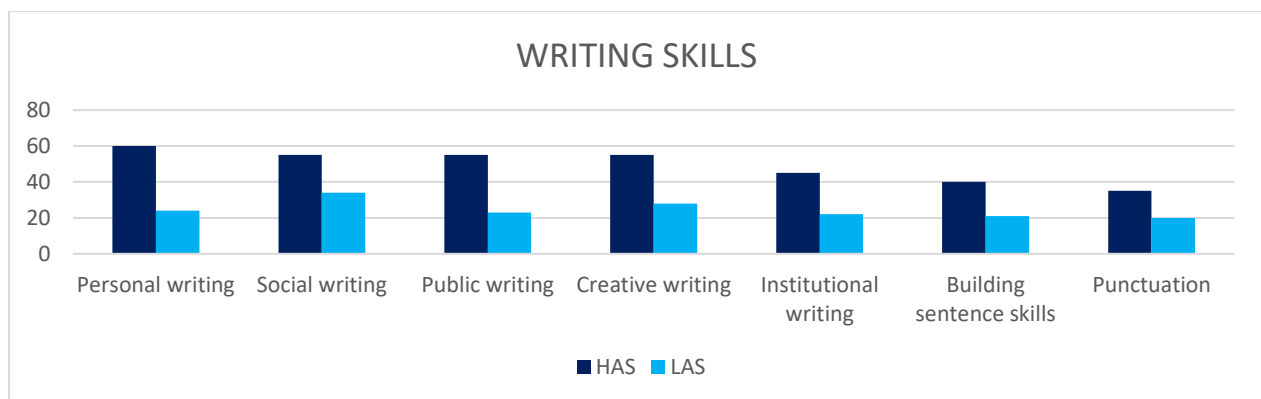


Figure 4: Frequency of use of WBSMP in classroom instruction of writing skills.

From Figures 3 and 4 above, the findings show that the schools which used the web-based and social media platforms more frequently recorded an improved performance in the acquisition of specific language skills, which shows that the use of

web-based and social media platforms in classroom instruction of reading and writing skills positively influences the learners' acquisition of these skills.

In order to determine the extent to which the use of WBSMP in classroom instruction influences learners' acquisition of language skills, the students and teachers from the sampled schools were required to rate their opinion against statements on a five-point Likert scale with a score of **1** indicating 'Strongly Disagree' and **5** indicating 'Strongly Agree. (**SA**- Strongly Agree, **A**- Agree, **N**- Neutral, **D**- Disagree, **SD**- Strongly Disagree) The ratings were analyzed as frequencies and weighted averages.

Students' responses on the influence of the use of blended learning in classroom instruction on learners' acquisition of language skills

The students from the sampled schools were required to rate their opinions against ten statements in order to determine the influence of the use of WBSMP in classroom instruction on the acquisition of language skills. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' opinion ratings on the influence of the use of blended learning in classroom instruction on learners' acquisition of reading and writing skills

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Σfi	$\Sigma fiwi$	$\frac{\Sigma fiwi}{\Sigma fi}$
Improved Extensive Reading due to WBSMP	55	130	9	114	33	341	1083	3.18
Improved Intensive Reading due to WBSMP	71	139	10	76	45	341	1138	3.34
Improved Comprehension Skills due to WBSMP	87	95	19	77	63	341	1089	3.19
Improved building sentence skills and paragraphing due to WBSMP	77	111	32	77	44	341	1123	3.29
Improved punctuation skills due to WBSMP	65	114	20	80	62	341	1063	3.12
Improved personal writing skills due to WBSMP	93	95	20	67	66	341	1105	3.24
Improved social writing skills due to WBSMP	102	88	4	91	56	341	1112	3.26
Improved public writing skills due to WBSMP	102	91	12	75	61	341	1121	3.29
Improved Creative writing skills due to WBSMP	116	92	14	77	42	341	1186	3.48
Improved Institutional writing skills due to WBSMP	69	96	28	57	91	341	1018	2.99

Source: Field Data, 2022

Most of the respondents believed that web-based and social media platforms helped learners acquire English language skills and that the use of WBSMP significantly influences higher levels of acquisition of language skills in the schools sampled for the study. The findings showed that the majority felt that the use of Google Meet, Zoom, Google Classroom, WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube improves performance in reading and writing skills in English. The responses also showed the most commonly used WBSMP as follows: Most commonly used- Google Meet and WhatsApp; Google Classroom and Facebook were less used whereas the least used were Zoom and YouTube. According to this study, the schools which used the web-based and social media platforms more frequently recorded an improved performance in the acquisition of specific language skills as indicated through the written task findings which shows that the use of web-based and social media platforms in classroom instruction of reading and writing skills positively influences the learners' acquisition of these skills.

The ratings by each respondent were summed up in order to develop indices that measured the levels of influence of the use of WBSMP in classroom instruction on learners' acquisition of language skills. The indices had values ranging from 10 to 50. Values above 30 imply that the factor was highly rated by the majority of the respondents while values lower than 30 imply the influence of WBSMP in classroom instruction on acquisition of language skills was high. The descriptive statistics for the variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for students' ratings for influence of blended learning

School Mean Category	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max	Std. Error of Mean
High Achievers	104	44.9423	3.57670	35.00	50.00	.35072
Lower Achievers	237	26.6538	9.29955	12.00	46.00	.60661
Total	341	32.1670	11.6522	12.00	50.00	.62549

Source: SPSS Output

Table 2 shows that the mean rating for the variables of WBMSP was high in High Achievers' schools ($m = 44.9423, sd = 3.5767$) which was a value above 30.00. On the other hand, the value was low for Low Achievers' schools ($m = 26.6538, sd = 9.2995$) The ratings of students, therefore, imply the use of WBSMP in classroom instruction has a greater influence on the improvement of language skills in High Achievers' schools but low influence in Low Achievers' schools. Thus, this shows that blended learning can help in learners' acquisition of language skills in English.

Language teachers' responses on the influence of the use of blended learning in classroom instruction on learners' acquisition of language skills

The teachers of English from the sampled schools were required to rate their opinions on the influence of the use of WBSMP in classroom instruction on the acquisition of language skills. against five statements. The results were presented in Table 4.19 (SA- Strongly Agree, A- Agree, N- Neutral, D- Disagree, SD- Strongly Disagree)

Table 3: Respondents' opinion ratings on the influence of the use of blended learning in classroom instruction on learners' acquisition of language skills

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Σfi	Σfwi	$\frac{\Sigma fwi}{\Sigma fi}$
Using web-based platforms in addition to normal learning enhances acquisition of language skills	8	6	11	6	1	32	110	3.44
Using social media platforms enhances acquisition of reading and writing skills	10	0	5	13	4	32	95	2.7
Reading and writing skills should be taught through WBSMP apart from normal teaching	10	3	6	7	6	32	100	3.13
Using WBSMP positively influences learner attitude to language skills	10	0	13	5	4	32	103	3.22
Overall performance in reading and writing skills in English is likely to improve due to blended learning	8	3	8	12	1	32	101	3.16

Source: Field Data, 2022

The rating by each of the language teachers was summed up in order to develop indices that measured the levels of influence of the use of WBSMP in classroom instruction on learners' acquisition of language skills. The indices had values ranging from 5 to 25. Values above 15 imply that the factor was highly rated by the majority of the respondents while values lower than 15 imply the influence of WBSMP in classroom instruction on the acquisition of language skills was high. The descriptive statistics for the variables are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for language teachers' ratings on the influence of blended learning in classroom instruction on the acquisition of language skills

School Mean Category	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean	Minimum	Maximum
High Achievers	24.6000	10	0.84327	0.26667	23.00	25.00
Lower Achievers	11.9545	22	2.23558	0.47663	8.00	15.00
Total	15.9062	32	6.24944	1.10475	8.00	25.00

Source: SPSS Output

Table 4 shows that the mean rating for the variables of WBMSP was high for teachers in High Achievers' schools ($m = 24.6, sd = 0.84327$) which was a value far above 15.00. On the other hand, the ratings for teachers in Low Achievers' schools were low ($m = 11.9545, sd = 2.23558$). This agrees with student ratings for the two school categories and therefore implies that the use of WBSMP in classroom instruction has an influence on the improvement of language skills in the High Achievers' schools but minimal influence in Low Achievers' schools.

The findings from the Interview Schedule for Group 1(ToL); 2 (P); 3 (CQ) and 4 (LS) also showed that the learners' acquisition of reading and writing skills in both English greatly improved with the use of WBSMP in instruction.

The findings of two teachers each from the two categories of the schools are as follows:

T1-HAS- *"We adopted much of the new technologies during Covid-19 and since then, we have been using it, especially during the brief holidays where we assign our learners specific tasks in languages such as reading on a wide variety of topics related to emerging issues such as drug and substance abuse, new technology, sports and many others... Of course, to ensure they do it, we ask them to come up with notes, write articles etc. We even encourage them to have discussion groups on WhatsApp and discuss issues academic."*

T2-LAS- *"I must admit that for technology, we haven't fully embraced it for our learners, given the obvious reasons that most of them while away from school, may not be able to access the internet unless for those in urban areas, though they rarely use it for academic purposes."*

"We prefer giving them written or typed assignments which we go through later. Of course, we got disadvantaged during the Covid-19 break which caught us off guard and unfortunately, many learners missed out and it in a way affected their performance, especially in Languages since they even could not access set books."

Two Principals from each of the school categories also gave their responses:

P1-HAS- *"As soon as Covid-19 interfered with the school calendar, we opted to try the online classrooms for the majority of our learners and most parents took it positively and supported their children in order to keep abreast in their academics."*

"We trained our staff on Google Classroom, and I am glad to report that for a start we worked very well. Later, we would still hold regular online classrooms and assign specific tasks to learners who shared with the rest and eventually 99.9% were involved. It helped a great deal in improving their performance thereafter. With time, teachers informally still post assignments for learners on their class walls through WhatsApp which is cheaper and easily accessible."

P2-LAS- *"We haven't done very well on this...probably, due to factors like the cost implications and inaccessibility to the internet for most of our learners especially while at home. Though once in a while, I see a few teachers of sciences integrate ICT which they learned through SMASSE training, though for languages, with no such programs, the majority don't use it formally with their learners but for the future, we are considering it since we lost so much during Covid-19."*

Other respondents reported as follows:

CQ1- *"With TPD, CBC and even before, the Ministry is ever training teachers on ICT integration in Education. We do not anticipate many challenges, maybe a few teething problems here and there...but I believe they are manageable..."*

LS1- *"I can say that integrating ICT in teaching and learning languages should be a plus...definitely, it improves learners' motivation, interest and eventually performance. That is the way to go."*

The interview findings showed that the respondents were positive about blended learning and ICT integration; they believe that the use of WBSMP positively impacted the acquisition of English language skills and revealed that the use of Blended Learning should be fully adopted to help resolve a few challenges experienced in the teaching and learning process.

Table 5 Written Task Findings: Performance in specific language skills

School category	No.	Writing Task		Reading Task	
		Test 1 Mean	Test 2 Mean	Test 1 Mean	Test 2 Mean
High Achievers' Schools	100	10.68	15.80	14.50	17.50
Low Achievers' Schools	243	8.93	9.08	10.21	10.45

Source: Field data

Table 5 above shows a summary of the findings of the written task for both High and Low Achievers' Schools which support the questionnaire and interview findings. The task, a list of 10 words commonly used with WBSMP was given to the learners to read, spell and write them correctly. This was done before and after the holiday break. The results show that those who

frequently accessed and used web-based and social media platforms recorded a positive deviation of +5.12 in the writing task and +3.0 in the reading. On the other hand, those in LAS recorded minimum or no improvement in both writing and reading tasks. i.e., +0.15 and +0.23 respectively.

The ratings by each of the respondents were summed up in order to develop indices that measured the influence of the use of WBSMP in classroom instruction on learners' acquisition of language skills. The indices had values ranging from 4 to 19. Values above 11.5 imply that the factor was highly rated by the majority of the respondents while values lower than 11.5 imply the influence of WBSMP in classroom instruction on the acquisition of language skills was high. The descriptive statistics for the variables are presented in Table 1.6.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics for the written task on the acquisition of language skills

School category	Writing task					Reading task			
	No	Before break: Test 1	After break: Test 2		Before break Test 1	After break: Test 2			
		Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev	Mean.	Std	Mean	Std Dev
High Achievers	100	10.68	3.30	15.80	2.75	14.5	2.50	17.5	2.08
Low Achievers	243	8.93	3.64	9.10	3.67	13.0	3.16	13.75	3.18

Source: Field Data

Table 6 shows that the mean rating for the variables of the written task was high for learners in High Achievers' schools ($m = 17.5$ $sd = 2.08$) which was a value far above 11.50. On the other hand, the ratings for teachers in Low Achievers' schools were low ($m = 13.75$, $sd = 3.18$). This agrees with student ratings for the two school categories and therefore implies that the use of WBSMP in classroom instruction has an influence on the improvement of language skills in the High Achievers' schools but minimal influence in Low Achievers' schools.

4. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that frequent use of web-based and social media platforms helps learners acquire English reading and writing skills. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendation was made: There is a need to ensure that all schools have access to these key technologies for use in classroom instruction of language skills in English in order to improve performance since the availability of key technologies for web-based and social media platforms used in classroom instruction positively impacts teachers' and learners' perceptions on the use of WBSMP on learners' acquisition of English language skills.

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