




Using a Blended Learning Approach to Encourage Course Interaction in a First-Year Business Communication Module

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to examine the effectiveness of blended learning in encouraging course interaction amongst first-year students studying a business communication module. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the increased use of blended learning as a teaching approach to encourage learning regardless of the location. Existing research on blended learning suggests its value in promoting increased student engagement, ultimately contributing to positive educational outcomes. Data was collected through a cross-sectional survey whereby a questionnaire was distributed to the respondents using Google Forms. Data was analysed on the same platform. Cross-tabulation was used to understand the relationships between factors in participants' responses to the questions. Results indicate that blended learning successfully drives course interaction because the combination of class-based and online engagement positively impacts how likely students are to engage in course content. This paper makes a valuable contribution in the form of underscoring a pressing need for research that is aimed at understanding how blended learning shapes the experiences students have with their modules, as well as how these factors may shape current practices in blended learning. Most students indicated that they would recommend blended learning as it increased participation and engagement with their course content.

KEYWORDS

Blended learning; business communication; course interaction; student engagement; higher learning.

INTRODUCTION

The trend toward digitalisation in education has become more visible now that educational institutions are required to administer blended learning, m-learning, e-learning, or hybrid learning into their curricula (Pikhart & Klímová, 2019a). Although blended learning is challenging in traditional classroom settings, educators are encouraged to use it because it fosters effective management of learning environments for educators and students (Supriyatno et al., 2020). Simonson and Seepersaud (2018) define blended learning as institution-based, formal education where interactive telecommunications systems connect learners, instructors, and resources. Simonson and Seepersaud's definition emphasises telecommunication links between learners and teachers, but the face-to-face component is not emphasised, as it has been variously stated by previous scholars (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham, 2006) that blended learning is a purposeful combination of face-to-face teaching and learning (TL) with computer-assisted learning to increase the achievement of TL outcomes (Gaol & Hutagalung, 2020). However, the emphasis of blended learning in this study is focused on combining two approaches: learning in a traditional face-to-face, physical classroom and learning remotely using the online space and technological devices.

The remote aspect of blended learning can occur in synchronous or asynchronous ways. In a synchronous learning environment, learners and the educator are separated in terms of space but not time, and they use technological tools to meet and communicate at a set time (Günes & Alagözlü, 2021); therefore, responses to what is being communicated are immediate and similar to what happens in a traditional classroom. What differs is the medium of instruction, which, in this instance, is online and virtual, albeit face-to-face, instead of natural and physically present face-to-face teaching interactions. When students and lecturers participate in asynchronous online education, they are separated in terms of time and space (Carswell & Venkatesh, 2002), and the response to what has been communicated may take several hours to several days.

According to Driscoll (2002), although the popularity of blended learning has increased in higher education, academics mostly use it for supplementation instead of capitalising on the potential for enhancing students' learning experiences. Driscoll's statement may be difficult to substantiate given the wholesale embracing of online learning in response to COVID-19 that led to the shutting of university campuses. Blended learning offers many advantages over traditional teaching methods, for example, greater flexibility in downloading learning materials independent of time, location, or physical attendance at a learning event (AlKhaleel, 2019). During the International Blended Learning Conference in 2011, Hart et al. (2011) established that many institutions are systematically trying different forms of blended learning to improve student learning experiences and be more student-centred in their approach to teaching.

In modules like Business Communication, educators tend to recognise classroom-based learning as the best course delivery method because it allows them to quickly monitor the practical aspects of the module, such as report writing, letter writing, etcetera. However, Pikhart

(2020) argues that students' satisfaction with a subject is not based on traditional or electronic approaches; it stems from the learning environment the educator creates or the level of interest educators and students have in the subject (Wengrowicz et al., 2018). Moreover, course formats do not determine student learning outcomes; whether learning takes place virtually or physically, the learning outcomes can be similar if the learning activities are comparable (Simonson et al., 2011). Thus, although blended learning has been lauded, it still depends on the learning environment and interest shown by all stakeholders of the TL situation to achieve the desired outcomes.

While acknowledging the malleable and multidimensional nature of course interaction, understanding factors contributing to student academic success is important for institutions, instructors, and students (Reeve, 2013). Davis et al. (2020) believe that when researching student learning, the importance of prior knowledge about the course requires more consideration. Previous studies have focused on using data demonstrating students' participation levels in learning management systems to predict or measure student success (Zhang & Dang, 2020) while failing to consider the many factors students bring to a course, most importantly, their prior knowledge.

Debates surrounding student engagement or how to ensure that students are engaged have been ongoing during past decades (Maxwell-Stuart & Huisman, 2018). According to Zimba et al. (2021), lecturers agree that blended learning helps them to engage social work students. Research has also shown that student engagement predicts student satisfaction and academic achievement (Kahu, 2013), and engaged students tend to perform better (Denovan et al., 2020). However, Schoffstall et al. (2013) argue that successful course engagement is measured through the extent students participate in academic activities. From this perspective, this paper makes a valuable contribution to knowledge by emphasising the need for research that is aimed at understanding how blended learning shapes the experiences students have within their modules and how these factors can shape current practices in blended learning.

One of the reasons students experience challenges when interacting with course content is the lack of diverse means for fostering course engagement and other students or institutional factors (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Institutions of higher learning are required to maintain supportive learning environments; however, that is not always the case. Learning experiences must also be more relevant to students' interests and everyday experiences. The commonly practised traditional 'sage on stage' teaching method creates problems with course interaction because 21st-century teaching requires more active teaching techniques that allow students to participate in their learning actively. Such learning techniques involve asking students to answer questions or clarify concepts individually or to each other (Bajak, 2014).

Hence, Zeng and Wang (2021) indicate that online learning is not an immediate solution to improving students' engagement. However, combining synchronous and asynchronous components is essential because the combination ensures beyond-classroom interaction on a particular platform. The combination will require that the materials are selected to increase

comprehension and decrease the difficulties students experience when accessing online learning materials (Chung et al., 2020). As such, Jacobs (2013) calls for further research on course interaction-related challenges experienced within the higher education sector. The present research is in response to such a recommendation.

Thus, as students spend more time learning online than they used to pre-COVID-19, it is critical to examine the level to which students examine or study course contents and participate in class activities. Although previous studies have examined how students engage with their course content, these studies were conducted before COVID-19, and none were conducted within the context of South African universities. Considering this, the findings of this study will add to the existing body of knowledge about various ways to encourage students to interact with their course contents. The study's findings may help improve teaching and learning in higher institutions, especially in South Africa.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The research participants are first-year students registered for a Business Communication module at a Johannesburg, South Africa, private college. The module aims to introduce students to basic workplace communication principles that will equip them with the necessary skills required in day-to-day business operations where effective communication is essential. The college offers various qualifications, including short learning programs, higher certificates, diplomas, and degrees. Although learner capabilities cannot be generalised, most institution students have basic computer and digital literacy skills. The institution also offers an introductory module on computer skills. In addition to traditional lectures, activities, lecture slides, announcements, discussions, notes, and other materials are posted on Blackboard—a learning management system the institution depends on to offer additional support.

Learning in all contexts, including the Business Communication module, is managed by the lecturer assigned to the module at the time. The lecturer also directs students to the learning management systems and encourages them to engage with the content, complete the activities, and engage in discussion. Ferrer et al. (2020) emphasised the importance of student involvement in steering themselves to learn. Hence, Business Communication module students have control over decisions associated with how they interact in learning environments, much of this being determined through their attitudes and experiences (Katz, 2002). Students' level of control over their learning reiterates the belief that it is not only the lecturer's responsibility to ensure that learning occurs, but students also need to be responsible and active participants in their studies.

Many scholars have studied blended learning from different perspectives, but research on business communication-related topics about blended learning in South Africa has not been conducted. This study proposes blended learning as a strategy for educators to improve course interaction in a Business Communication module. This recommendation is not based on the researchers' assumptions but stems from the findings of the study, supported by previous

research that has demonstrated the value of blended learning in enhancing TL, fulfilling the need students have for varied support structures (Celestino & Noronha, 2021). The following research questions and objectives inform the investigation undertaken in this study.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do classroom and online-based activities enhance students' engagement with course content in a first-year business communication module?
2. How do first-year business communication students perceive the usefulness of blended learning as a teaching approach?

Research Objectives

1. To assess the effectiveness of integrating online-based and classroom activities in enhancing students' engagement with course content.
2. To evaluate the perceived value of blended learning as a teaching approach in a first-year business communication module.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Blended Learning

A meta-analytic study of blended learning in higher education demonstrates that students registered in blended learning programmes achieve considerably better results than students who completed their studies using the traditional classroom instruction format (Bernard et al., 2014). Other researchers make similar findings; for example, González-Gómez et al. (2016) emphasise the critical role educators play in providing adequate support in blended learning set-ups, which requires a unique combination of skills for managing multiple roles and responsibilities.

Several scholars have conceptualised blended learning differently and what it is expected to achieve in learning environments and for those who engage in blended learning. Hrastinski (2019) outlines the five most common conceptualisations of blended learning (see Table 1). The various debates on what blended learning is are indicative of the notion that blended learning means different things to different people (Driscoll, 2002) and should thus accommodate all students' needs.

The first conceptualisation is the inclusive conceptualisation in which blended learning is practised inclusively. The second conceptualisation is the quality conceptualisation of blended learning that emphasises the importance of the TL approach to improve the quality of learning. For instance, a lecturer may use a discussion forum in the virtual online learning environment to prepare students for an upcoming physical face-to-face lecture or use a virtual classroom to continue a previous discussion, given that lecture times are limited to a specific period.

Table 1.*A Summary of the Different Conceptualizations of Blended Learning*

<u>Blended learning conceptualisation type</u>	<u>Description</u>
Inclusive conceptualisation	States that blended learning should be practised inclusively.
Quality conceptualisation	Stipulates that blended learning should improve the quality of teaching and learning.
Synchronous conceptualisation	Real-time lectures that take place using rich-media technologies such as video and web conferencing.
Digital classroom conceptualisation	Students access multimedia lessons using tablets, cell phones, desktops or laptops.
Quantity conceptualisation	Refers to the quantity of face-to-face and online learning.

The third conceptualisation is synchronous, directed towards TL, takes place in real-time and includes both online and campus learners (Hrastinski, 2019). In this instance, students participate in remote lectures using synchronous technologies such as video and web conferencing (Bower et al., 2015). According to Cakir and Bichelmeyer (2016), the fourth conceptualisation gives students access to multimedia lessons using technological devices such as tablets, cell phones, desktops, or laptops. Online technologies are used in a physical classroom; therefore, studies conforming to this conceptualisation are often conducted in K-12 (from kindergarten to Grade 12) settings. The last or fifth conceptualisation is focused on the quantity of face-to-face and online learning. Hrastinski (2019) stated that for learning to be categorised in line with blended learning, physical face-to-face classes should be reduced, and a large proportion of TL should occur virtually online.

A critical review offered by Oliver and Trigwell (2005) concluded that blended learning is not necessarily limited to a mixture of traditional and online learning; the term blended is applicable in any instance where two or more teaching formats are combined. For example, educators can integrate e-learning with physical face-to-face learning or combine learning theories, learning objectives, or mixed pedagogics. Therefore, despite the diverse and, at times, conflicting opinions about blended learning, researchers have maintained that the aim of combining virtual online and physical face-to-face TL should be to capitalise on the advantages of doing so, and the combination should be executed in a way that the two formats complement each other (Cakir & Bichelmeyer, 2016) to achieve quality outcomes.

Macmillan Education South Africa (2014) stated that blended learning can be incorporated into the classroom to encourage students to participate in their learning process actively. Learners are motivated to achieve more academically because, in blended learning

settings, students are expected to demonstrate a heightened understanding of the content and critical thinking capabilities. In this respect, combining classroom interaction with virtual online-based learning increases course success.

Blended learning is an effective learning strategy as opposed to traditional learning and delivery mode because it allows students to participate in active learning, caters to their learning intelligences, and learnings are synchronously and asynchronously presented (Facharzt et al., 2013). Integrating the traditional classroom with technology allows educators to use the benefits of both learning approaches.

Course Interaction and Student Engagement

Interaction in education is defined as the student's engagement with the instructor, other students, the course content, and the medium of communication used for instruction on the course (Thurmond, 2003). The instructor and course content is pivotal to learning activities in institutions, and the way online and classroom activities are managed will determine the degree to which students interact and exchange information with themselves and their instructors. This study focuses on what Thurmond and Wambach (2004) define as student-content information, which refers to the interaction when students examine or study course contents and participate in activities.

According to Ferrer et al. (2020), the student engagement concept is yet to receive consensus and definitional clarity as there are ongoing debates about the exact meaning of student engagement (Gordon et al., 2015). The existing definitions designate engagement as a student-centred approach to TL focused on students' connection with their learning environments (Axelson & Flick, 2010). Sun and Rueda (2012) emphasise involvement and active participation in learning, emphasising that time, quality effort, and energy are required to perform academically as a college student (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Based on the abovementioned points, researchers acknowledge that how students engage with their course content is multi-faceted, dynamic, and complicated (Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

Different types of course interactions and student engagement can occur across diverse higher education spectrums. A study by Davis et al. (2020) views engagement from four perspectives.

Behavioural Engagement

Behavioural engagement refers to cases where students participate and attend classes without exhibiting negative or disruptive behaviours, and discipline is practised as the institutional rules and norms are followed in the learning process (Fredericks et al., 2004). Behavioural engagement best communicates students' commitment, attention, and effort except when engaging with course content (Reeve, 2013).

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement is focused on how students experience enjoyment, interest, and belonging in education (Trowler, 2010). The literature defines emotional engagement experiences differently but commonly distinguishes between positive and negative emotions

(Fredricks et al., 2004). The emotions students experience within the abovementioned context include sadness, happiness, boredom, excitement, and anxiety. These emotions may create or remove a sense of belonging to the academic institution and influence students' motivation towards completing their academic activities (Davis et al., 2020).

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement is based on the goals and challenges students seek to achieve concerning their studies (Reeve, 2013). Cognitive engagement may be experienced on different levels. For instance, students may be invested and strategic in acquiring knowledge specific to their modules, or they may be strategic solely to obtain good grades.

Agentic Engagement

Fredericks et al. (2004) introduced a fourth dimension of engagement that should be added to represent students' proactive strategies to engage in their learning. The agentic engagement dimension emphasises the agency students practice in creating a learning environment that is motivationally more self-supportive.

Factors influencing how students interact with course content are perceived through providing unique learning experiences, the clarity of course instructions, and the course design (Beard & Harper, 2002). Facilitators may employ several strategies or modes of delivery to encourage students to engage in course interaction.

Studies on blended learning that are focused on how it is experienced in module-specific cases have been done in disciplines such as linguistics (Korkealehto et al., 2021), business studies (Clark, 2021) and health sciences (Arora et al., 2021). In communication studies, scholars such as Lavrinenko and Shevchenko (2019) have stated that blended learning may be used to share new information and encourage students to practice new communicative methods. Their study concludes that the preferred blended learning methods include video recordings and digital games to facilitate learning. Pikhart et al. (2019) implemented Bloom's taxonomy in their blended learning intercultural Business Communication class. They discovered that applying Bloom's taxonomy in blended learning environments is useful, citing that the practice created student satisfaction and a positive outlook on learning.

Shih and Tsai (2020) found that blended learning increased student-to-teacher engagement in the flipped classroom model, thus positively affecting students' learning outcomes. More research is required on this topic to understand how this TL format affects course interaction. These findings are crucial in the South African context of higher education, which has various complex educational challenges, such as the digital divide (Kativhu, 2021).

METHOD

The following section will discuss the research approach, participants, data gathering, and data analysis method.

Research Approach and Participants

The research approach used in this study was quantitative and employed a survey design and questionnaire as the data collection method. The motivation to use a quantitative method in this study was based on the desire to explore the relationship between course interaction and blended learning. The accuracy and precision of quantitative research have been noted by researchers (Muijs, 2010), especially the opportunity it gives to draw valid conclusions from the findings because quantitative research produces statistical evidence of the research outcomes. However, Du Plooy et al. (2021) argue that the gathered statistics must be consistently monitored over time for quantitative methods to be accurate. The approach to the research problem was also quantitative because it required looking at the association between cause and effect using a deductive method of reasoning to find answers to the research problem so that conclusions could be drawn based on the results (Ary et al., 2018).

The targeted participants comprised approximately 116 students, but in the end, only 50 students completed the questionnaire. Data was collected from full-time, first-year students registered for a Higher Certificate in Events Management with Business Communication as a subject. The students were undergraduate students between the ages of 17 and 28 years; furthermore, the research was open to all genders (namely those who identify as males, females or part of the LGBTQI+ community); all racial groups were accommodated in the study. The students were informed of the study during one of their face-to-face lectures, and it was indicated that they would be given online activities to enhance what they had learned in class. A questionnaire was sent to their emails to gather feedback about their experiences of the blended learning exercise during their studies. The voluntary nature of the research was explained to the students, and the choice to participate was left up to the students.

The questionnaire included a combination of ranking and matrix questions, and respondents were required to provide feedback by ranking several predetermined options. Close-ended questions were included to give the respondents options from a fixed number of responses. The requirement was for them to select one option for the choices presented. Last, multiple-choice questions were included to allow students to select a category applicable to them. A total of ten questions were asked, and the nature and requirements of the questions are provided in the results section.

The study was carried out using a non-probability sampling technique called convenience sampling. According to du Plooy et al. (2021), non-probability sampling is used when it is either difficult or impossible to gain access to an entire population, and convenience sampling involves the selection of research subjects that are convenient, accessible, and in proximity to the researcher (Obilor, 2023). Convenience sampling was considered appropriate because many students were sent the questionnaire and were asked to respond to it during their own time.

The respondents were accessible and shared a familiar environment, and it was also less time-consuming, considering that this is a cross-sectional study. The selected sampling method

was also inexpensive, used fewer resources, and was less complex to complete (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012) than would be a probability sampling method.

Data Analysis Method

Google Forms has an integrated data analysis tool that interprets and analyses data based on respondents' feedback. Google Forms Automated Analytics instrument was used, which offered a convenient environment for evaluating feedback to the questionnaire the students were sent, and the instrument was used to provide rapid feedback to the students, in line with their participation in the study (Wiemken et al., 2018).

Cross-tabulation was used to understand the relationship of factors in participants' responses to the questions (Khabour et al., 2020). For instance, one of the questions required that students comment on whether the blended learning activity they completed contributed to their understanding of the course content. By reducing certain aspects of the data management workload, Google Forms allowed keener focus on other aspects of their studies. Furthermore, many responses could be shown with pivot tables, making it convenient for summarising the data.

Validity and Reliability of the Study

The inclusion of ranking, matrix questions, close-ended questions, and multiple-choice questions in the questionnaire enhances internal validity by diversifying the data collection methods, allowing for a more comprehensive representation of participants' experiences. Although inductive reasoning underpins data analysis and discussion, it aligns with the exploratory approach inherent in this study, enabling us to draw conclusions from the findings and gain a more profound understanding of social phenomena (Strydom, 2013) in this study. This approach is consistent with the common practice of asking, "What does the data tell us?" when inductive reasoning is employed in quantitative research (Casula et al., 2021, p. 1711), supporting internal validity by ensuring the study focuses on its stated purpose.

The data collection tool, Google Forms Automated Analytics, not only promotes consistency but also facilitates a standardised data collection process, thereby reducing the likelihood of errors associated with manual data entry (Adelia et al., 2021; Raju & Harinarayana, 2016) and consequently enhances the study's reliability.

RESULTS

The questionnaire used for data collection included ten questions aimed at addressing and gathering feedback on how students felt about blended learning as an approach to encourage course interaction in a first-year Business Communication module. Students were requested to respond using private email accounts to maintain their anonymity as respondents. The questions asked in the blended learning questionnaire are listed in Table 2.

The results are divided into different focus areas and categorised according to each question's focus. In line with this, the following findings emerged.

Table 2.
Survey Questionnaire

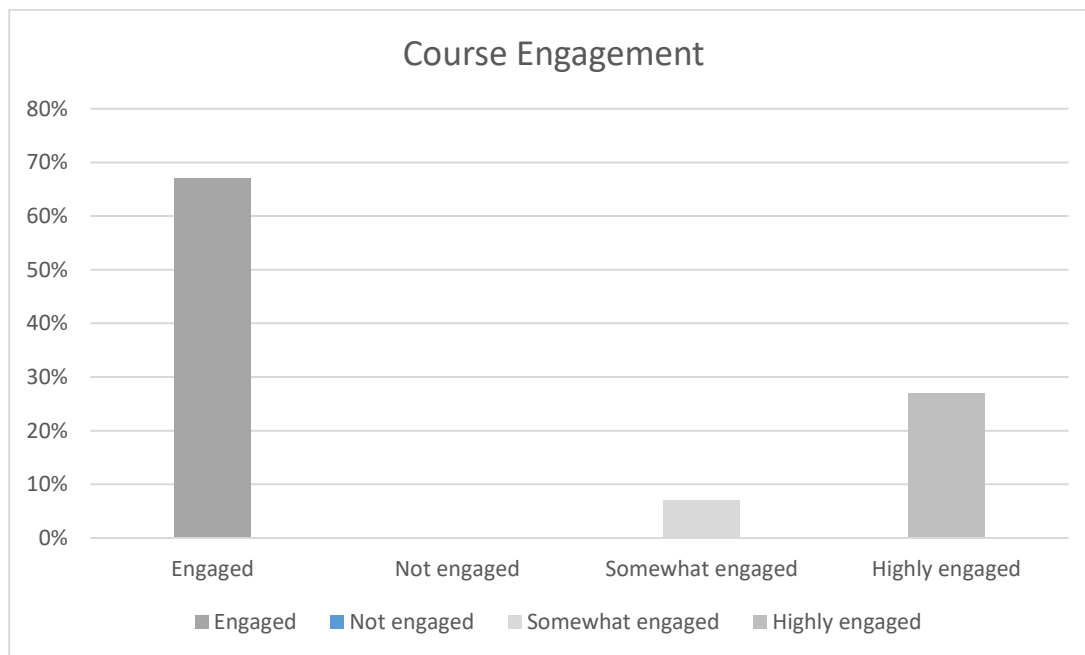
The Questions	
	1. On a scale of 1 to 4, how engaging would you rate your course to be?
	2. How active are you in studying and engaging with your course materials?
	3. How many times do you go through your course material per week?
	4. Are you familiar with what a blended learning approach is?
	5. Was the blended learning activity effective in encouraging you to participate in course interaction?
	6. On a scale of 1 to 4, how helpful was the blended learning activity?
	7. Did the online activity effectively tie into what was done in the classroom?
	8. Did the blended learning activity improve your understanding of the course material?
	9. If the blended learning activity was helpful in increasing your course interaction, how much would you say you have improved as a result of the intervention?
	10. Would you recommend using a blended learning approach to increase course interaction in a business communication module?

Course Engagement

The first question was a rating question; the purpose was to understand how engaging students felt the Business Communication module was in encouraging course interaction at a first-year level. This question was also used as a foundation to examine later the effectiveness of blended learning to increase course interaction. Some 67% of the sample group felt engaged, and 27% found the Business Communication module highly engaging. The remaining 7% of the sample group were neutral in their response as they responded that they were only somewhat engaged by the Business Communication module (see Figure 1). None of the students reported not feeling engaged. Therefore, given the percentage of students who felt engaged, it can be concluded that Business Communication students were engaged in their learning activities. The findings of this study show that the Business Communication students were having a reasonable learning experience made possible by blended learning. Scholars have emphasised the importance of student engagement. Engaged students have been shown to achieve meaningful learning experiences (Bajak, 2014) and are current with their learning activities. Several scholars have emphasised students' positive feelings towards a course where they feel engaged (Pikhart et al., 2019).

Figure 1.

Perceptions of engagement with course content.

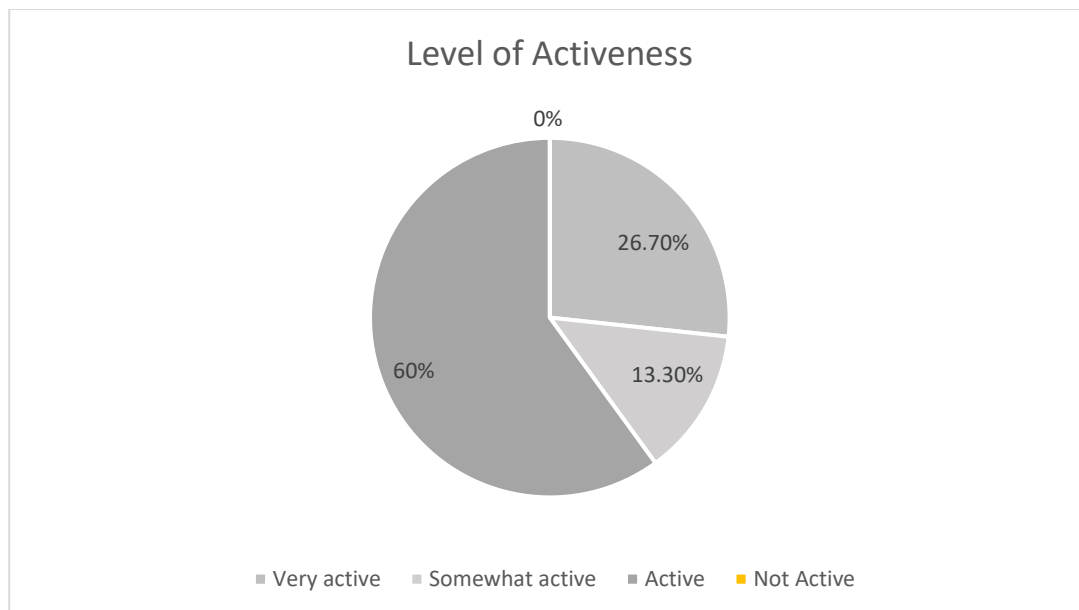


Level of Activeness in Relation to Course Interaction

Question 2 was asked to determine how actively students engaged with their course materials. The feedback indicates that 60% of them were active in their studies and engaged with course materials, 27% were highly active, and the remaining 13% of students felt somewhat engaged. None of them confirmed not being active (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Activeness in interacting with course materials and studying.



The findings show that students were 60% active with course materials, which supports the findings about their engagement and active use of course materials. The results suggest that

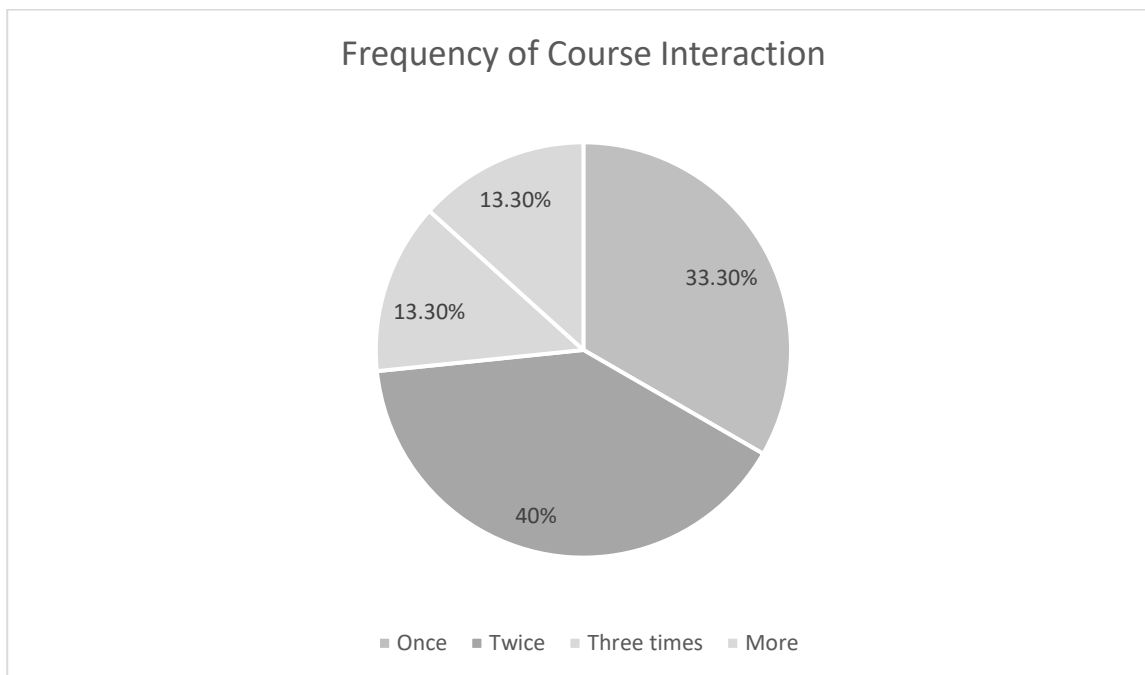
students participated highly in the blended learning approach. The findings also point to the fact that the lecturers of Business Communication use the blended approach appropriately to encourage students to engage and participate in course activities (Keith & Steward, 1998). In addition, the findings indicate that students are active learners who can apply their knowledge practically in the real world because blended learning can provide multiple opportunities for students to engage with learning in the different ways that appeal to them.

Frequency of Course Interaction

Grave (2010) noted that the amount of time students spend studying impacts the grades they achieve positively. Question 3 is relevant to Grave's observation as it determines the number of times the sampled group of students went through their course materials weekly. Judging from the responses, most students go through course materials twice per week; they make up 40% of respondents. The number of students that go through their course materials once a week was 33%, and 13% of the students engaged three times a week, while another 13% conveyed more eagerness by stating that they tend to go through their course materials more than three times per week (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

The number of times students go through course materials.



The findings show students' robust participation in accessing course materials and emphasise the need to consider learning approaches to scale up course interaction among students.

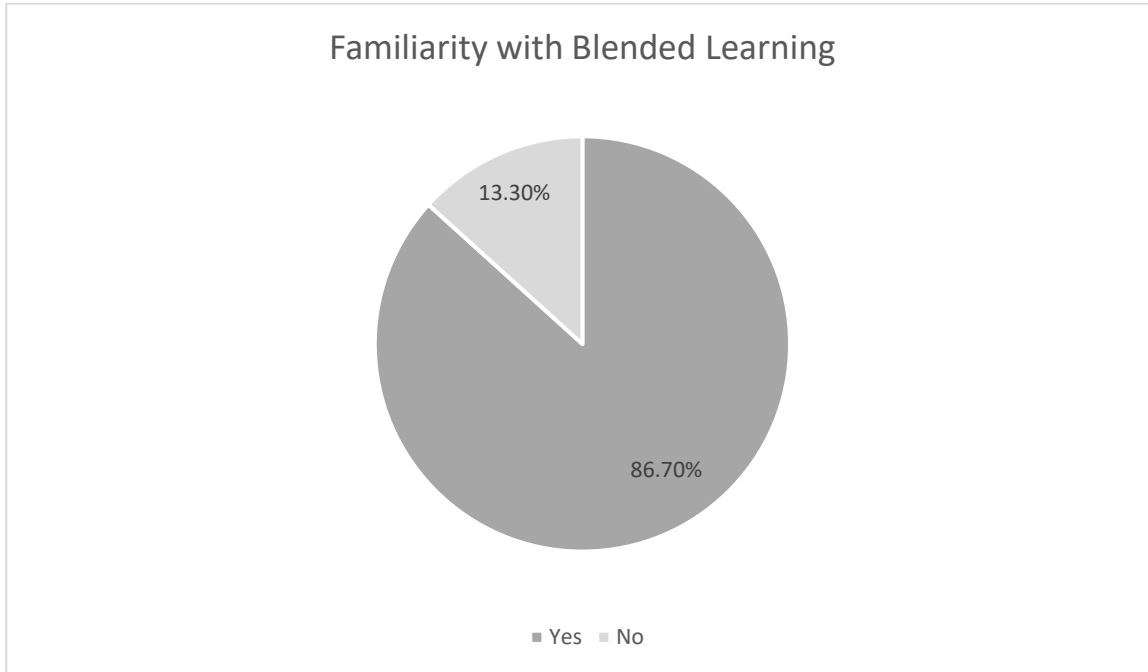
Familiarity with a Blended Learning Approach

The fourth question aimed to understand whether students had grasped a blended learning approach based on the instructor's information about this approach and their prior knowledge. The majority of students knew this TL format. Given the abovementioned findings, the findings

in this section are not surprising. Figure 4 shows that 87% of students communicated an understanding of blended learning, while 13% exhibited no knowledge of the approach.

Figure 4.

Understanding of the blended learning approach.

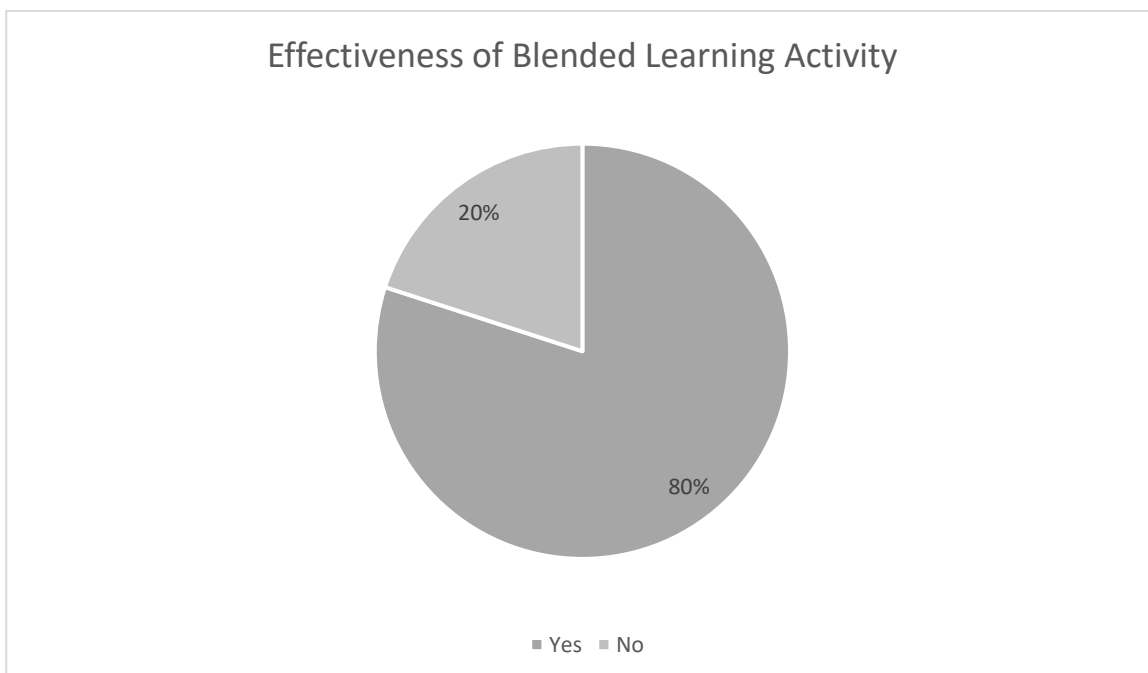


With 87% of students claiming familiarity with blended learning, the findings indicate the momentum the blended learning approach to learning has gained in an attempt to mitigate the deleterious effects of COVID-19 on learning activities.

The Effectiveness of the Blended Learning Activity

Figure 5.

Effectiveness of the blended learning approach.



An intervention was applied by providing a blended learning activity for first-year Business Communication students. As previously mentioned, the fundamental purpose was determining if the approach would effectively encourage course interaction amongst the sampled group. Gogos (2014) stated that incorporating blended learning into academic programmes fosters collaborative learning that is hugely satisfying to students, thus resulting in course success. In this respect, 80% of the class responded that they found the blended learning activity effective in encouraging them to participate in course interaction. Some students did not find value in the activity, and they made up 20% of the feedback received for this question.

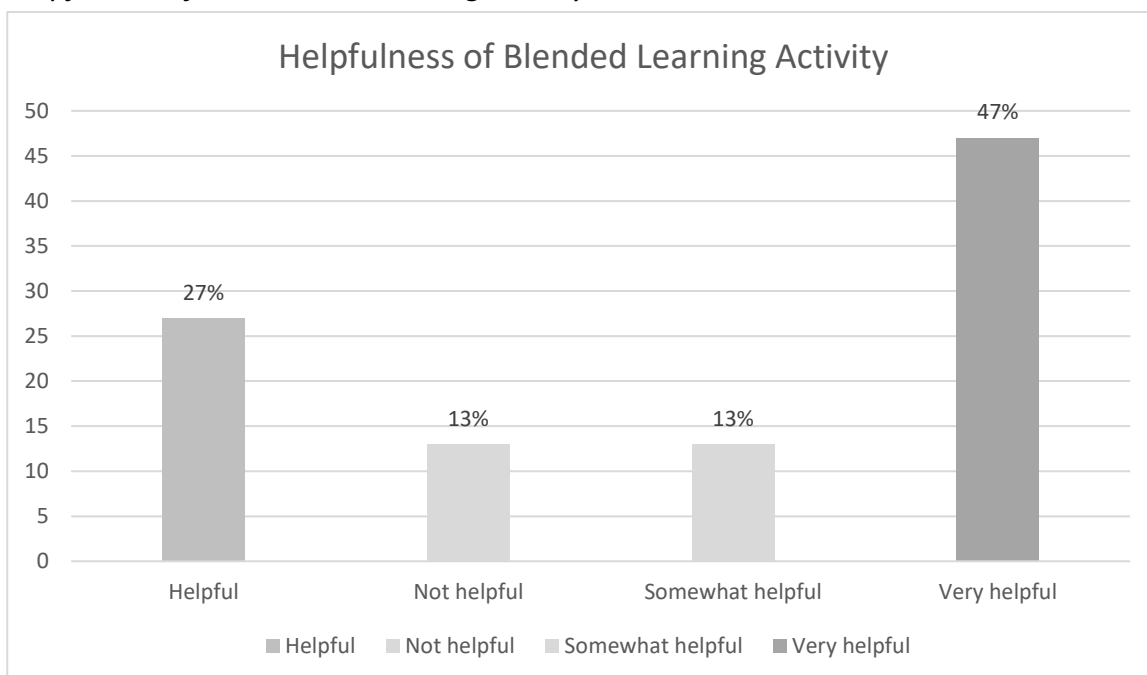
Blended Learning Activity Scaling

Researchers believe blended learning is the future of education as students have been said to enjoy this learning method due to the versatility it provides for course delivery and course interaction (Kahu et al., 2018).). A scaling question was included to gauge how the participants felt about the blended learning activity they had partaken in and to what extent it provided value.

The findings revealed that 47% of the students found the activity very helpful, and a further 27% communicated that the activity was helpful. There was a tie between the remaining two categories: 13% of the students perceived the activity as somewhat helpful, and 13% did not find value in the activity. The combination of 47% and 27%, which is 74%, shows that a large percentage of students had positive feelings about blended learning.

Figure 6.

Helpfulness of the blended learning activity.

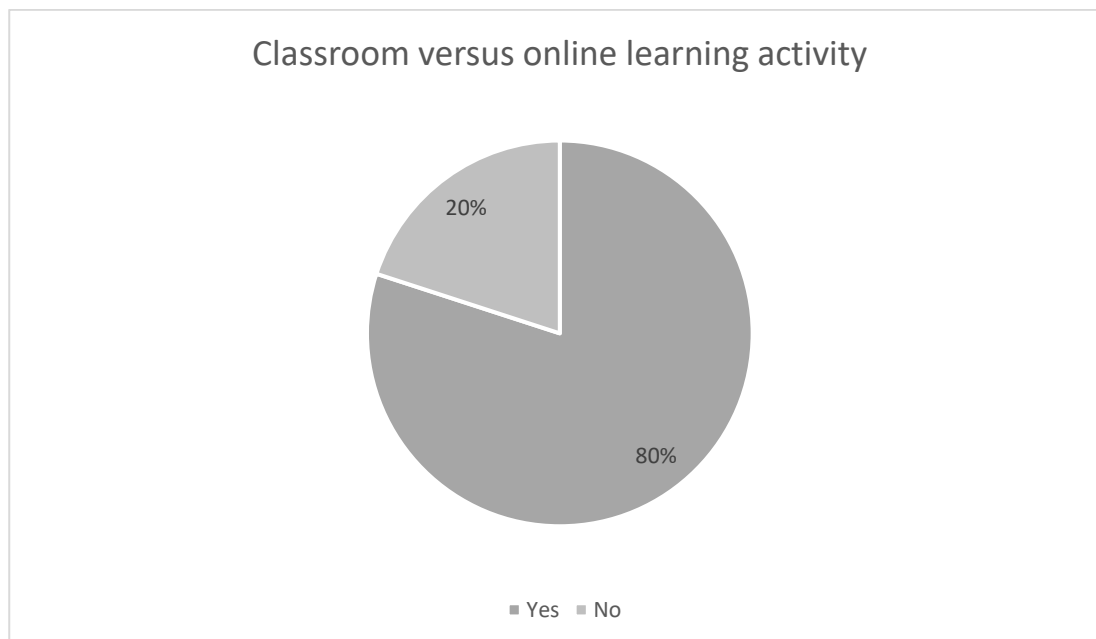


Relationship Between Classroom and Online Activity

When students were asked if the online activity tied into what was done in the classroom, 80% said yes, and 20% said no (see Figure 7).

Figure 7.

The relationship between classroom-based and online-based activity.

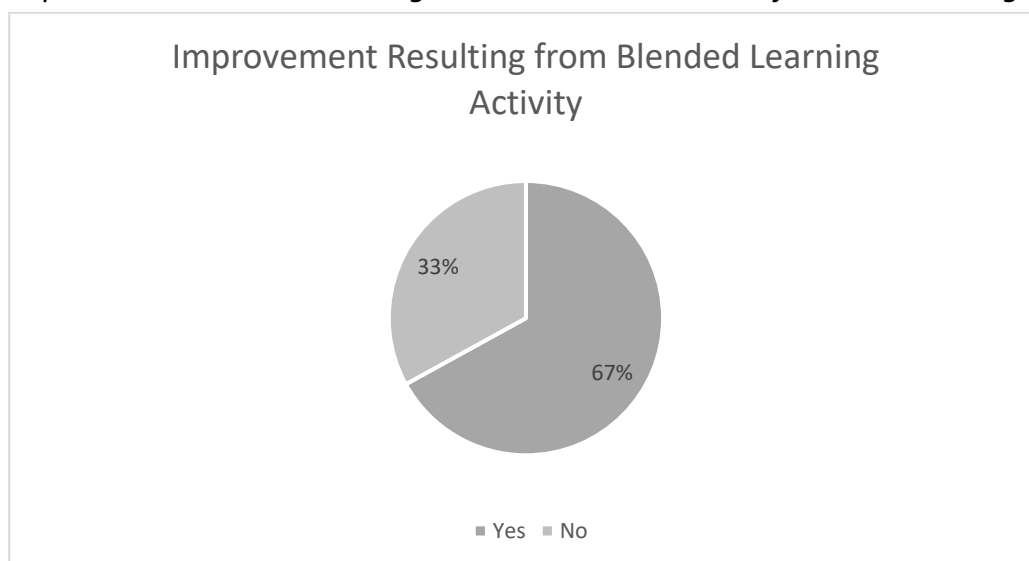


With blended learning encompassing a combination of classroom and online-based activities, the aim of Question 7 was to see if a synthesis existed between the different modes of interaction. In addition, the aim was to gather feedback on whether the students could identify the relevance or relationship between classroom-based and online-based engagement. The findings show that both online and classroom learning are relevant to the students and further demonstrate how both classroom learning and online learning can complement each other.

Improvement Resulting from Blended Learning Activity

Figure 8.

Improvement in understanding course content because of blended learning activity.



The participants were asked to state if the completed blended learning activity had improved their understanding of course content. According to Leasure et al. (2000), blended

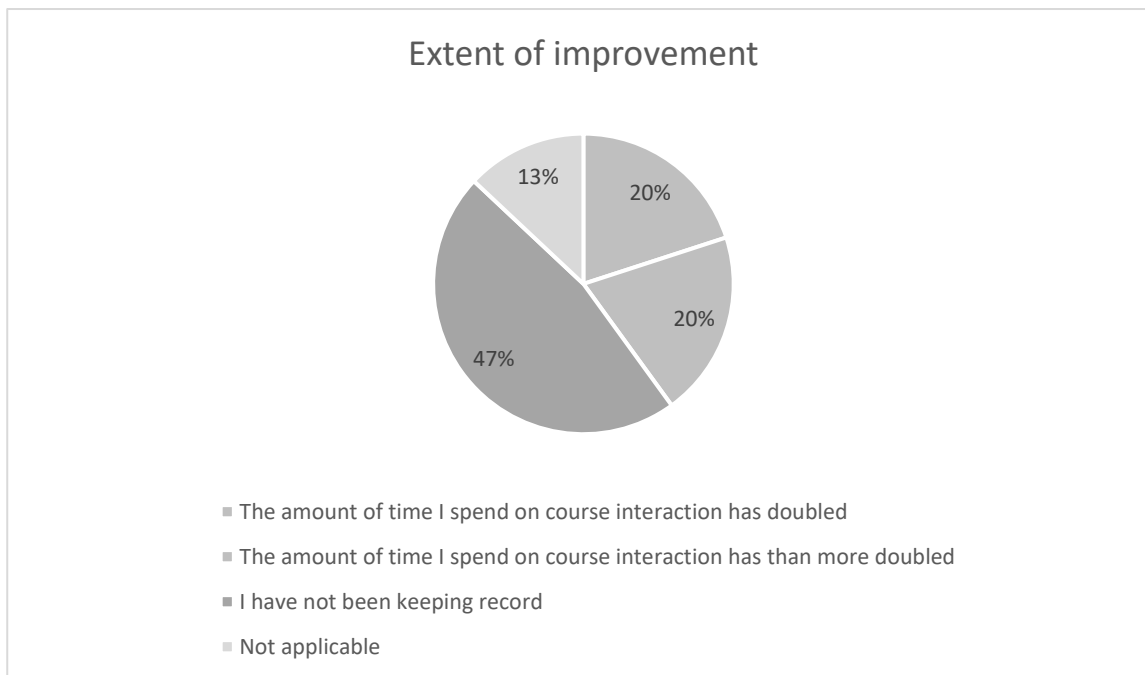
learning can increase understanding and knowledge by giving students different reference points for knowledge accumulation. The percentage of students who claimed to have had their understanding of the course content increased through an application of blended learning was 67%; 33% of the participants expressed that the blended learning activity did not improve their understanding of course content.

The Extent of Improvement

The students who identified blended learning as valuable had different views regarding the approach's improvements to their academic life. The percentage of students who stated that they had not been keeping a record of how much their course interaction had increased as a result of blended learning was 47%, while 20% of the students said their course interaction had more than doubled, and a further 20% expressed that their course interaction doubled; 13% of the respondents did not find the question relevant or applicable (see Figure 9).

Figure 9.

The extent of improvement in course interaction after the application of blended learning.

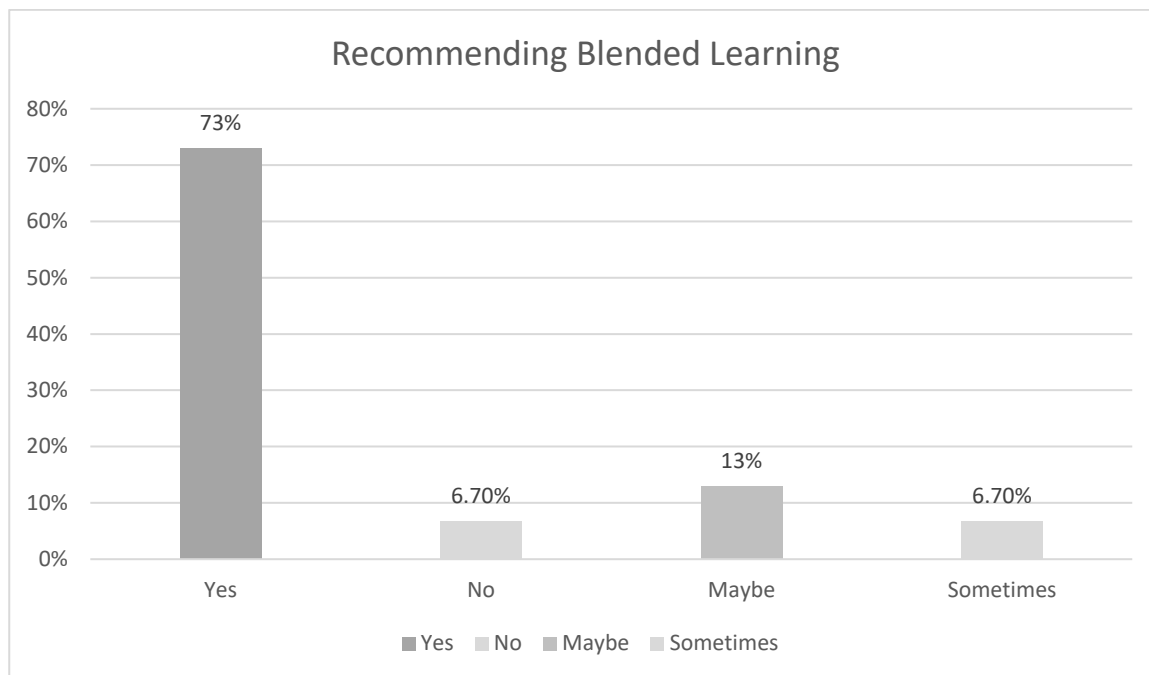


Recommending Blended Learning

The last question in the questionnaire examined the recommendations students would provide for applying blended learning in a first-year Business Communication module. The respondents (73%) said they would recommend this teaching and learning format, 13% were undecided as they selected "maybe" as a response, 6.7% said they would not recommend blended learning, and 6.7% would recommend it sometimes.

Figure 10.

The recommendation students would provide for the application of blended learning.



DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine if blended learning could be used to encourage first-year Business Communication students to become engaged in their course contents. The study's results have pointed to a positive relationship between blended learning and course interaction, and the findings show that blended learning can be used to scale up students' participation in learning activities. These findings align with research conducted by Kintu et al. (2017), who revealed that blended learning produced student satisfaction and achieved learning outcomes. The findings of this study corroborate those of previous studies that demonstrate students' satisfaction with online education (Baczek et al., 2021). Similarly, a study conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic provided support for our findings, indicating that the majority of students at Abu Dhabi University actively participated in online discussion forums, one of the key components of blended learning (Vijayavalsalan, 2018).

Flores *et al* (2015) furthermore posited that engaging with course content outside of the physical classroom assists students with revision and provides for consolidation of what they have learnt. This claim is in line with the feedback respondents provided. Although a few students did not find value in blended learning, most students who participated in the study found value and demonstrated the value blended learning could provide in increasing course interaction in a first-year Business Communication module. The reasons why a few participants did not find value in blended learning in the study may be attributed to several factors. According to previous studies, these factors could include challenges with Internet connectivity and a lack of digital skills (Elfirdoussi et al., 2020), issues related to concentration and motivation (Razami & Ibrahim, 2021), and a perception that blended learning, particularly its online version,

is not an appropriate teaching and learning approach for their field of studies (Abbasia et al., 2020; Chakraborty et al., 2021).

However, in line with our findings, Razami and Ibrahim (2021) highlighted that students in Malaysia generally preferred blended learning formats, which encompass a combination of online and in-person instruction. However, they also noted that some students encountered difficulties in the online component of blended learning, specifically in maintaining engagement, focus, and motivation.

In our study, a significant percentage of the students agreed that blended learning effectively encourages course interaction and would therefore recommend blended learning to increase course interaction. This result confirms the importance of this approach for learning in higher institutions in South Africa. Our study's findings contrast with those of Baytak (2022), who reported that a substantial proportion (77.4%) of students at a Turkish university encountered difficulties accessing course materials due to technological challenges. It is worth noting that Baytak's (2022) findings may differ from ours due to several factors. Our study participants were enrolled in a Business Communication programme at an institution with a well-resourced online learning management system (LMS) and had received adequate computer skills training for blended learning. In addition, Baytak's (2022) study, participants did not express a general aversion to online learning. However, the state of the institution's online LMS for health-related studies cannot be overlooked as a potential contributing factor to the reported challenges.

Furthermore, student unpreparedness for learning in online environments is a common issue that aligns with Baytak's (2022) findings. In this regard, Maphalala et al. (2021) reported that South African students struggled to navigate their institution's LMS independently and required lecturers' assistance. While Maphalala et al.'s (2021) findings differ from our own, they support the experiences of a small percentage of our participants who reported difficulties accessing course materials, perceived no improvement in course content, and experienced low course interaction. Consequently, Maphalala et al. (2021) recommend that academic staff members actively provide support and positive feedback to facilitate self-directed learning, which is essential for success in online learning environments.

Implications Of the Findings and Recommendations

The findings of this study provide both higher institutions and their stakeholders with important information about blended learning, especially in highlighting it as a means to increase students' engagement to achieve the overall objective of learning in South Africa. While this study is important for understanding how students perceive blended learning, it also shows why engaging at a deeper level is necessary to understand what blended learning would mean in post-COVID-19 South Africa for students and higher institutions in South Africa. The benefits of blended learning were highlighted in the data analysis and the relevant literature. Therefore, teachers and higher institution scholars should tap into the benefits of blended learning to achieve their learning outcomes.

One of the benefits of blended learning is that students who were absent from the online class could access the teaching recordings, and it is quite inexpensive to make available TL materials to students as they will be uploaded online for students to download. The findings imply that higher institutions should embrace blended learning to increase participation and course interaction.

Due to the need to cushion the effect of nonstandard and inferior education (Badat, 2008) that excluded a majority of South African from higher education, the findings are important in responding to the challenges of the massification of enrolment of students that register in a bid to right the wrongs of apartheid. With blended learning, it would be possible to accommodate the large classes that have become the norm in university classrooms.

One of the advantages of blended learning is that it allows the engagement of students from different backgrounds using multimedia and multimodal learning designs. In this way, students can learn in a self-directed mode using technologies (McAuliffe, 2019). Given the current study's findings, blended learning has the advantage of an approach that can be used for teaching and learning in diversified South African classrooms.

Given that blended learning allows the lecturers to use several digital tools that help them achieve several purposes, students' engagement in their learning and more robust interpersonal relationships between the students and their lecturers are enhanced. This finding resonates with McAuliffe (2019), who emphasises that educators should be committed and ready to use digital tools to engage students. The findings show that students are generally well-disposed to blended learning. Hence, for any lecturer who plans to use blended learning, students must be educated and aware of how it will be used and what to expect to maximise their participation.

Given the percentage of respondents (33%) who believed that blended learning activities did not improve their understanding of course contents, there is a need for further studies using the same sample of students or students elsewhere to ascertain what needs to be done to improve students' understanding of course contents and learning in general. Such studies would be best served using a longitudinal approach because it would offer time to examine the topic and open the study to respondents registered for Business Communication studies or other qualifications.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study was its focus on one private institution of higher learning and one course. Extrapolation of the findings to public higher education needs to be treated cautiously because the learning environment in both private and higher institutions may not be the same. However, the findings can be cautiously generalised because most students, especially the disadvantaged students, are from the same socio-economic background. A similar study with the same focus could be broadened to include public universities and TVET colleges, especially in considering what shapes the attitudes students have towards using blended learning in Business Communication modules. The second limitation is that the quantitative

method used in the study constrained students' responses because they had to choose from predetermined answers. Therefore, a mixed-method approach is recommended as the qualitative component of such a study would allow students to provide more extensive feedback. Qualitative data may help provide answers regarding attitudes and other issues that may help improve students' blended learning experiences. In conclusion, the absence of a theoretical framework in this study is acknowledged, as it could have facilitated the interpretation of the findings through a robust and pertinent theoretical lens within the field of blended learning.

CONCLUSION

Exposing students to blended learning helps them be active participants in their learning experience and promotes collaboration among students. It is evident through the results obtained in this study that the sampled group of students largely benefitted from the blended learning activity.

It is also important to highlight that this study is based on a South African private institution of higher education. Although intended to contribute to the blended learning literature, generalisation and application in the context of other educational environments should be done cautiously. However, the findings are generally positive regarding the future of blended learning in higher institutions and suggest a need for well-structured learning environments that will improve the quality of higher education in which a blended approach is used to achieve learning outcomes.

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