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Implementation of Blended Learning Model to the Non-English Major Students in EFL Setting in the Russian Arctic

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Abstract

The article considers a blended teaching of English to non-English major students in the Russian Arctic. The relevance of this study is due to the fact that new technologies are being introduced into the education system in order to improve the quality of education. Blended learning is understood as a hybrid learning integrating online education and in person education. The article provides an overview of the research conducted on blended learning abroad in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL). It presents a blended learning model that consists of 3 blocks: methodology, learning process and assessment of learning outcomes. In general, this model consists of face-to-face instruction and digital platform Skyes. The pilot training was conducted to prove the effectiveness of the discussed blended learning model. 100 non-English major bachelor students of the 1st year students from the North-Eastern Federal University, the Arctic State Institute of Culture and Arts and the Arctic State Agrotechnological University took part in the pilot training. The students were divided into 2 experimental and 2 control groups of 25 students. The students of the control groups attended traditional classes with a distance learning format while the students of the experimental groups studied English in a blended learning format. The pilot training lasted for one semester. During the training 4 English skills were tested in students: 1) listening 2) vocabulary 3) grammar 4) reading. The results before and after the pilot training are presented. The results of pilot training prove the effectiveness of the implemented blended learning model in comparison with face-to-face instruction.

Keywords: blended learning, EFL, face-to-face instruction, blended learning model, English skills, e-learning.

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1. Introduction

Modern language education, including teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), is being transformed based on the active use of new information technologies (online tools, web technologies and Internet technologies). This transformation of the education system in general, and EFL learning process, in particular has been accelerated in terms of COVID-19 pandemic. With the development of new learning tools, the modes of learning are likewise changing. In this regard, blended learning has become a popular mode of teaching at universities worldwide.

As the researchers testify, blended learning has grown into a significant factor for the development of higher education by integrating features and benefits of technology and traditional learning education (Zhang, Zhu, 2018). Blended learning being understood as web-based and face-to-face instruction exemplifies an entirely new model that can transform both teaching and learning (Moskal et al., 2011: 13; Horton, 2002; Osguthorpe, Graham, 2003). Similarly, blended learning refers to an in-person education combined with online opportunities, and the online materials are presented either in a distant way or in the traditional classroom (Thompson et al., 2019).

The increasing volume of online teaching suggests that online course delivery formats will be used significantly in higher education. As it is stated in the research, the growing number of students taking online courses implies that blended learning will increase in proportion in higher education (Aslanian, Clinefelter, 2013). The educational system under reform necessitates a development of a blended learning model which affects training process, learning outcomes and perspectives of learning. This leads to a paradigm change in the EFL learning and teaching and reflects a significant influence of innovative approaches (Dziuban et al., 2018).

In the field of teaching EFL, the practitioners are challenged with finding an effective way to create a blended learning environment for students at the tertiary level. Blended learning represents the use of new educational methodologies and activities, which accentuate student-centered active learning along with a more traditional approach which is a teacher-centered approach (O'Connor et al., 2011). More specifically, blended learning is regarded as an "enriched, student centered learning experiences made possible by the harmonious integration of various strategies, achieved by combining face-to-face interaction with information and communication technology" (Torrisi-Steele, 2004: 366). As a teaching method, blended learning offers students flexible class schedules, network development, collaborative work with peers, active and reflective learning via the use of technology (Villalon, Rasmussen, 2017). Blended learning implements the advantages and teaching/learning processes of synchronous and asynchronous distance teaching so that learners and teachers and students can engage in educational activities in synchronous and asynchronous online situations (Bosch, Laubscher, 2019).

In terms of EFL education, blended learning is interpreted as more "individualized learning experience, more personalized learning support", "independent and collaborative learning", "student engagement in learning", more practice of the target language beyond the classroom, and flexible study (Marsh, 2012: 4-5). Thoroughly blended learning is "a hybrid model of e-learning that allows coexistence of conventional face-to-face teaching methods and e-learning activities and resources in a single course" (Littlejohn, Pegler, 2007: 26). A successful blended learning model comprises an initial face-to-face meeting, weekly online assessments and synchronous chat, asynchronous discussions, e-mail, and a final face-to-face meeting with a final examination (Martyn, 2003).

An effective way to implement blended learning is to develop a teaching model. The model includes face-to-face learning activities between teachers and students in the classroom and online activities. Outside of the classroom, students can access additional curriculum resources and do homework through the Internet platform (Sharpe et al., 2006). Teachers can also develop and upload instructional materials including text, audios, images, videos, and animation files on the Internet platform preliminarily so that students can start studying at their own pace (Bosch, Laubscher, 2019; Dziuban et al., 2018).

Recent research studies have explored the effect of blended learning on students' attitude, motivation to learn English and their academic performance at the universities. A study on students' attitude towards asynchronous distance learning and blended learning was conducted at a Turkish university. The first group was trained in asynchronous distance learning, the second group was trained in blended learning. The results demonstrated that the first group of students

was dissatisfied with the teaching content in asynchronous distance learning. The second group of students was satisfied with their courses via blended learning (Gunes, 2019).

As it was found out, blended learning positively influences students' learning performance as well as motivates them to practice the language more authentically by giving them enough time and space inside and outside the classrooms. This learning flexibility grants them a dynamic language input and upgrades their language proficiency (Oweis, 2018). Moreover, students' positive acceptance of a blended learning enhances their motivation and achievement in comparison with offline classes (Akkoyunlu, Soylu, 2016). Similarly, when learners have a positive attitude towards the implementation of blended learning approaches in their classrooms, they show better academic achievements in English courses (Akbarov et al., 2018).

The main goal of the EFL pilot teaching to be discussed in this article was to assess the effectiveness of blended learning model implementation into teaching practice at the tertiary level. To achieve this goal, the pilot study represents a quasi-experimental training that uses a pretest-posttest research design to measure the progress in the participants' performance. The four English language skills were tested: Listening, Reading, Vocabulary and Grammar.

The relevance of this pilot training is due the fact that the latest transformation in the higher education system requires development of the effective blended learning model in the EFL setting. Students' increasing the level of EFL competence at the tertiary level should be optimized through the integration of a blended learning model and traditional training in the education process.

While teaching students in the pilot training, we put forward two hypotheses:

Hypothesis$_0$. There is no difference in test scores between students who were trained in a blended learning context and students who took conventional distance learning.

Hypothesis$_1$. There is a significant difference in test scores between students who were trained in a blended learning context and students who took conventional distance learning.

The scientific novelty of this pilot study is the development of the EFL blended learning model for non-English major students (Engineering students) when teaching English at a university.

2. Materials and methods

Participants and Context

A group of 100 EFL university learners who participated in the present pilot study are bachelor students of the North-Eastern Federal University, Arctic State Agrotechnological University and Arctic State Institute of Culture and Arts, Russia. The participants are majoring in Engineering and predominantly native speakers of Yakutian language attending a "General English" course. For the purpose of pilot training, students with the Pre-Intermediate level (A2) are selected as this level proved to be the most common according to the results of the placement test. Subsequently, the 100 students of Pre-Intermediate level are divided into an experimental group of 50 students and a control group of 50 students in the first year of compulsory EFL learning. Specifically, 10 of the participants are females and 90 males, all aged 18 to 22.

Research Method

The present study includes pilot teaching of Engineering students; analysis of EFL pilot teaching; methods of observation – direct observation of students' performance, control of the students' progress; diagnostic method: sets of tests (placement test and progress tests); methods of mathematical statistics, qualitative analysis of the pilot study data and summarizing the outcomes of the pilot training.

The teaching of English as a foreign language is based on communicative approach (Wilkins, 1983; Candlin, 1976; Widdowson, 1978; Humes, 1971), competence-based approach (Egbert, Shahrokni, 2019; Dragoo, Barrows, 2016; Henri et al., 2017), and the theory of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; O'Leary, 2014).

Instruments

The instruments of the pilot training were two sets of tests held at the beginning and at the end of semester. Two sets of tests were utilized. Each set of tests contains a pretest and a posttest. The first set of tests (Language Hub placement test) was employed to determine the participants' English proficiency level, with the mean score of 27 (that is A2 CEFR level).

The second set of tests (progress tests) was made by teachers in "Test Generator" on units of the coursebook "Language Hub". Progress tests monitor improvements in English skills in

Listening, Grammar, Vocabulary, and Reading prior to and after the pilot training. The students performed tests online.

The "Listening" part consisted of 2 tracks and 15 multiple choice questions. The "Reading" part included 3 texts and 25 multiple choice, gap filling and matching tasks. The "Grammar" part was composed of 30 multiple choice questions. The "Vocabulary" part contained 30 multiple choice questions. The maximum score is 100 points. The score distribution is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The score distribution

№	Total score	Grade
1	95-100	A (Excellent)
2	85-94,9	B (Excellent)
3	75-84,9	C (Good)
4	65-74,9	D (Good)
5	55-64,9	Fairly
6	25-54,9	Poor
7	0-24,9	Very poor

Teaching materials

The course "General English" is accepted by the curriculum conducted for 3 semesters during the 1st and 2nd of study at the university. In the first semester, the training is held in four units: "Family", "People", "'Food" and "Sports". Students studied vocabulary and grammar and performed assignments in reading and listening.

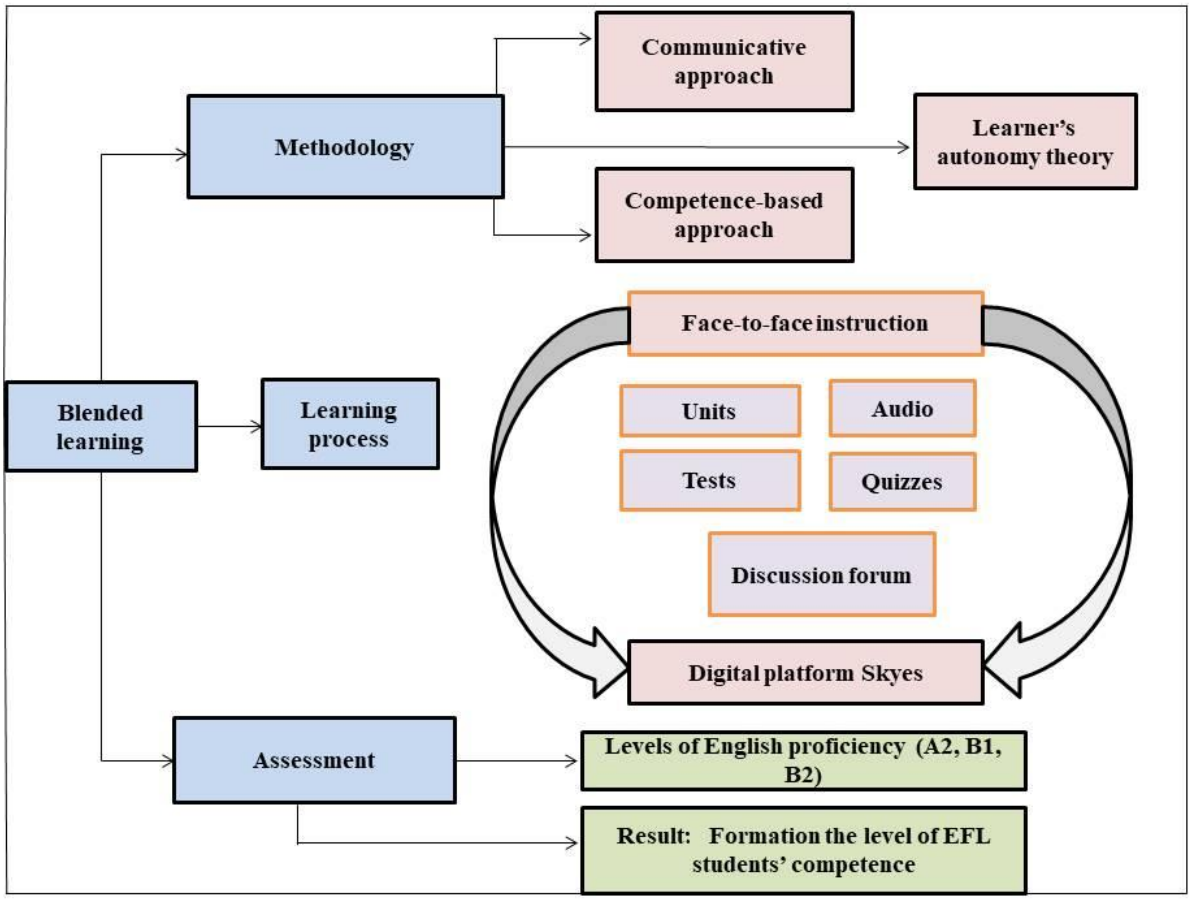

Fig. 1. Blended English learning model

The digital platform Skyes is a digital learning system that allows instructors to create virtual classrooms to give assignments to students for unsupervised study. It has synchronous and asynchronous online learning activities. The students did assignments in 4 units such as "Family", "People", "Food" and "Sports". The students have traditional classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and online classes on Tuesday and Thursday via Skyes.

The blended learning model consists of 3 interconnected blocks: 1. Methodology (communicative, competence-based approaches, learner's autonomy); 2. Learning process (face-to-face instruction, digital platform Skyes); 3. Assessment (improving levels of students' English proficiency). See Figure 1.

Procedure

The four teachers held lessons in this pilot training. The 100 students were divided into 2 experimental and 2 control groups. Each group was divided into 25 students.

During the first semester the students received online treatment on the digital platform Skyes. The students are required to practice pronunciation, to do grammar exercises, to read short articles, to learn new vocabulary, and to do listening assignments. In grammar, students performed grammar exercises. Specifically, the following grammar themes are studied such as to be, possessive adjectives, adjectives, have got, adverbs of frequency, active voice, modals, present, past and future forms. New words on the units are practiced in reading and grammar assignments. The target vocabulary is given to students according to the units. In reading, students read short articles and completed pre-text, text and post-text reading tasks. In listening, students listened to audio files and completed before listening and after listening tasks.

Face-to-face instruction was conducted by 4 teachers of English in four groups. The classroom hours made up 72 hours a semester. Overall, 36 lessons were conducted.

In classrooms the students were introduced to new units, teaching materials, and tasks. Accordingly, they continued doing exercises in listening, learning new vocabulary on new topics, practicing grammar on English tenses in active and passive voice, and making up dialogues on the digital platform Skyes. The students were asked to role-play in the classroom.

Statistical analysis

The first set of tests "Language Hub placement test" has 70 items. The participants were given a 45-minute test. The placement test was carried out once at the beginning of the semester and determined the students' level of English proficiency. According to the test, most of the students turned out to have the A2 level. Therefore, we chose 100 students of Pre-Intermediate level for the pilot training. At the end of the semester we did not test the level of English proficiency since we were aware that it will not change for one semester.

The second set of tests, the Progress test, was held at the end of semester to compare the test score results after the pilot training in experimental and control groups. Progress tests were made on instructional materials on the coursebook units. The progress test assessed four English skills such as Listening, Grammar, Vocabulary and Reading. To prove the significance of posttest score results, we performed the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test for independent samples.

Table 2. Listening pretest and posttest scores

Pretest							
Experimental groups	7.86	8.5	3.4698	1.8627	4	11	50
Control groups	4.22	4	3.4812	1.8658	0	8	50
Posttest							
Experimental groups	18.76	18.5	25.2473	5.0247	10	25	50
Control groups	9.76	9	18.3902	4.2884	5	20	50

Further, the results of the pretest and the posttest on English language skills will be presented in detail. The Table 2 shows the average score of students in listening in experimental and control groups. As it is seen from the table, the average score of students in experimental groups and control groups was equal at the beginning of semester. At the end of semester, a Mann-Whitney U Test found out that the difference between the means was statistically significant (U = 9.5; Z = -8.54834; p = 0,0001 < 0,01). The mean score of the listening post-test (x = 18,76) of experimental groups was higher than the mean score of the listening post-test of control groups (x = 9,76).

The Table 3 shows the results of the pretest of the posttest in reading. At the beginning, the difference between the average scores of the experimental and control groups is practically the same. A Mann-Whitney U revealed a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the tests (U = 62; Z = -8.18641; p = 0,0001 < 0,01). The mean score of the reading post-test in the experimental group (x = 24,06) was higher than the mean score of the reading posttest in the control group (x = 15,86). As the data demonstrate, the students' performance in reading from experimental groups is better than students from control groups.

Table 3. Reading pretest and posttest scores

Groups	Mean	Median	Variance	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Pretest							
Experimental groups	9.62	10	4.322	2.079	5	13	50
Control groups	9.14	9	4.123	2.03	5	13	50
Posttest							
Experimental groups	24.06	25	4.4657	2.1132	16	25	50
Control groups	15.86	16	11.9596	3.4583	10	20	50

Table 4 shows the results of the pretest and posttest on grammar in both discussed groups. According to the table, the difference between the mean scores was statistically significant (U = 55.2; Z = -7.09029; p = 00001 < 0,05). The mean score of the grammar posttest in the experimental group (x=26.84) was higher than the mean score of the grammar posttest in the control group (x = 17.88). This result showed that there was a positive effect of implementing the EFL blended learning model.

Table 4. Grammar pretest and posttest scores

Groups	Mean	Median	Variance	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Pretest scores							
Experimental groups	10.8	10	6.286	2.507	8	15	50
Control groups	10.94	10	5.894	2.428	8	15	50
Posttest							
Experimental groups	26.84	28	11.9739	3.4603	18	30	50
Control groups	17.88	17.5	29.0731	5.3919	10	29	50

The Table 5 shows the outcomes of the pretest and posttest on vocabulary. The posttest score results on vocabulary demonstrated that the mean score in the experimental groups is higher than

in control groups. A Mann-Whitney U found out there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of vocabulary acquisition (U = 61,6; Z = -6.9145; p > 00001 < 0,05). The post-test mean score (x = 28.2) of the experimental group was higher than the control group's mean score (x = 19.66).

Table 5. Vocabulary pretest and posttest scores

Groups	Mean	Median	Variance	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Pretest							
Experimental groups	14.46	15.5	14.213	3.77	9	19	50
Control groups	13.94	15	12.098	3.478	9	19	50
Posttest							
Experimental groups	28.2	30	8.2041	2.8643	20	30	50
Control groups	19.66	17.5	32.2698	5.6807	812	30	50

Overall, this pilot training lasted for one semester and demonstrated that the implementation of the EFL blended learning model proved to be effective. The careful distribution of assignments online/offline and the systematic conduct of classes in person and on the digital platform Skyes contributed to improving English language skills. The organization of learning process in person and through the digital platform Skyes as a system allowed improving the students' performance. Thus, the students who were trained in blended learning showed better performance than the students who were exposed to traditional distance learning.

3. Discussion

This pilot training is part of other studies that discussed and developed an effective model of blended learning for university students in EFL settings. This emphasizes the relevance and importance of improving students' level of English proficiency in many countries.

First, to achieve good results on EFL training, one must devise an effective blended learning model. This model is to include methodology, the learning process and predictive learning outcomes. In order to check the effectiveness of the model, it is necessary to test the model on control and experimental groups of students. The developed blended learning model is an English language teaching system. Good academic results are achieved through the systematization of tasks, assignments, tests, quizzes online and offline and in-person examination. This system has a clear goal of what students should achieve upon completion of each unit, in particular and the course, in general. The obtained results are consistent with the results of EFL studies in which the blended learning model was applied. For instance, the use of a blended learning model leads to the increase of students' posttests scores in the experimental and controlled groups when learning English. Both groups in the research received the same learning materials, but with a different way of teaching (Pammu et al., 2021).

This pilot training synchronizes with previous studies conducted in different countries when teaching EFL, proving that the blended learning model is more effective than traditional training. Specifically, the blended learning model creates a digital learning environment where students have access to materials and unlimited practice time. The digital environment itself implies independent study of an EFL outside of class and extracurricular time. This gives higher scores in the experimental group than in the control group. Thus, a connection was established between online learning and face-to-face meeting, which helped maintain the unity of the course (Yu, Du, 2019).

In line with the previously conducted research, with the model having its own structure and containing the goals of teaching English, students' skills are improved in four English skills such as listening, reading, speaking and writing due to the increased time for studying materials outside the classroom. Such effective model requires an online course on the digital environment and face-to-face meetings (Kolegova, Almani, 2021). Better academic achievement in their ESL blended learning course compared to students in traditional face-to-face learning mode was observed in the research undertaken in China (Zhang, Zhu, 2018). Such high results are achieved by students due to the interactivity of exercises, a variety of tasks to perform and the use of active learning methods during blended learning.

In accordance with the present results, previous studies conducted by Alipour (2020) and Djiwandono (2018) have demonstrated that the blended learning has resulted in the development of learners' vocabulary acquisition.

An increase in the level of understanding of an EFL text occurs due to additional materials for reading online. Particularly, this is facilitated by a more conscious acquisition of a large amount of vocabulary and grammar by students. Students pay more attention to reading texts in English. Students were often given reading assignments in order to prepare a short oral presentation on the material they read. Therefore, students show good reading scores compared to other English skills.

The result of this study was in line with the result of the research studies conducted by Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2004), and Herlindayana et al. (2017), and showing that listening and reading skills have been improved as a result of the application of blended learning model. The digital platform Skyes is uploaded with audio files that contain the vocabulary acquired on various topics. This platform provides a lot more audio files for the development of listening skills. In subsequent classes, the vocabulary is monitored and tested from audio materials. Therefore, students are immersed in vocabulary and grammar both online and in the classroom. It was also in favor of the result of the study conducted by Masita (2016), and Each and Suppasetseree (2021) proving that there was a positive relationship between blended learning and listening skills.

According to the model, the pilot training proves to be intensive and tense, affecting all discussed English skills. Training, practice and control are carried out online and in the classroom. Presentation of instructional materials online and offline lead to the situation that the students learn more both in individual units and throughout its course.

The improvement of students' grammatical skills was due to a variety of interactive exercises and tasks with pictures and audio files. When teaching English, we tried to involve all kinds of human feelings so that students would memorize the instructional material better. Subsequently, grammar is practiced in listening, reading and writing. This pilot training echoed other studies in which grammatical skills are improving as a result of implementing blended learning (Bataineh et al., 2019).

The developed blended learning model has shown its effectiveness in teaching/learning. This is confirmed by the performance of the control and experimental groups in this pilot study. However, the study under discussion has a number of limitations such as the duration of study, the coverage of students, the location of study and the context of study in one region of the country. In particular, the number of students is limited to 100 students. The training was conducted in three tertiary education institutions only in one region of the country. The duration of study lasted one semester. In addition, students of the same level of English proficiency, namely of the pre-intermediate level, participated in experiential learning. Moreover, the units on which students were taught were few.

Meanwhile, the prospectivity for developing a blended learning model should count several factors. First of all, a large number of students is needed to ensure the validity of the study. It is necessary to cover many diverse units while teaching English to students. Furthermore, students with different levels of English proficiency should be involved in pilot training. It is desirable that students be of different majors, so that English is not their major subject.

It is recommended to conduct research in different regions of the country to create an efficient digital blended learning model. The further prospects of developing a blended learning model contribute to the digitalization of EFL teaching. The digital learning environment for the university should be based on a blended learning model that proves to be effective in classrooms. The development of a reliable model of blended learning for students assists in finding a balance

between online and offline training in the process of the digitalization of education. Such a blended learning model will distribute training tasks for face-to-face lessons and for digital classes.

4. Conclusion

In this pilot study we checked the non-English major students' performance in four English skills: Listening, Grammar, Vocabulary and Reading in one semester. The students in experimental groups received treatment in blended learning while the students from control groups were taught English in the traditional way with asynchronous distance learning. In the pilot study 4 teachers of English took part, conducting classes in English online and offline.

The findings of the pilot study expose empirical support to the implementation of EFL blended learning model in comparison with traditional asynchronous distance teaching at the universities of the Republic of Sakha, North-Eastern Federal University, the Arctic State Institute of Culture and Arts and the Arctic State Agrotechnological University. However, it should be noted that our study has some limitations. Firstly, a small number of participants assume that the results generally may not be very representative of EFL learners. Secondly, the pilot study was conducted for a limited period of time. Thirdly, the pilot study took place within three universities in Russia's Arctic region.

The pilot study has demonstrated that the blended learning model of teaching English using the digital platform Skyes and face-to-face instruction proved to be effective in this teaching context. Moreover, it has been found that university EFL learners mostly like to study English intensively both in online and face-to-face format.

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