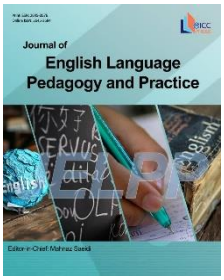

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Comparing the Effectiveness of Online and Blended-Learning in Enhancing Reading Comprehension among EFL learners with Limited Linguistic Background

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Abstract

Language education has been greatly influenced by the advancements in technology especially for non-native learners. The present study was an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of online and blended learning methods in enhancing reading comprehension skill among EFL learners with limited linguistic background, implementing an experimental approach. To this end, 168 EFL learners were chosen as the participants of the study based on convenience sampling. The participants were assigned into three groups: two experimental and one control groups, with 50 EFL learners assigned to each. The first experimental group received blended learning, the second experimental group was taught through online method, and the control group received traditional lecture-based instruction. The statistical analysis of the pretest and posttest data revealed that among the three groups, the blended learning group demonstrated the greatest improvement, followed by the online group, while the lecture-based group showed the least progress, suggesting that the combination of in-person interaction and digital tools better supports learners with limited linguistic proficiency. This research provides pedagogical recommendations for optimizing instructional strategies in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Blended learning; EFL learners; Lecture-based method; Linguistic background; Online learning; Reading comprehension

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1. Introduction

In contemporary educational contexts, the facilitation of learning and meaningful change must be the primary objective (Lin, 2017); this goal is in line with methods which focus on active participation of learners in knowledge construction (Stentoft, 2017). The rapid evolution of educational technologies has significantly transformed traditional pedagogical methods, especially in EFL instruction. Among these innovations, both blended and online learnings have emerged as prominent methods for improving language learning especially

reading comprehension ability- a critical area of development for EFL learners, particularly those with limited linguistic proficiency (Han & Ellis, 2021; Moradimokhles & Hwang, 2022).

Reading comprehension is generally defined as the process of making meaning from texts (Paris & Hamilton, 2014). It is recognized as a cognitive skill that requires deep thinking and reflection on a particular topic to understand it. Reading is widely acknowledged as a fundamental objective in the acquisition of foreign language (Vakili & Ebadi, 2019). Mastering the ability to comprehend English texts is essential for utilizing resources and gaining specialized knowledge across various disciplines (Lee & Mayer, 2015). Nevertheless, it is frequently regarded as the most demanding skill for EFL learners to develop (Macaruso et al., 2020). This complexity can be attributable to the cognitive demands of reading which requires not only decoding text but also understanding meaning and context based on prior knowledge, areas where many low-proficiency learners struggle due to deficiencies in vocabulary, grammar and background knowledge (Brevik, 2019). To increase learners` proficiency level in reading, lecture-based teaching methods alone with the sole transfer of knowledge on the part of the teacher and learners' passiveness cannot be a beneficial method. Unlike cognitive education, innovative teaching methods can cultivate knowledge construction and deep meaningful learning (Lin, 2015; Mukhtar et al., 2020).

Approaches to language education have undergone changes due to advancement in technology. These technological innovations have recently been adopted to enhance educational practices (Conole, 2014). Integrating innovative instructional methods via educational technologies appears to enhance learners' proficiency in areas like vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure. These advancements can be further promoted by engaging learners with more stimulating reading activities, stimulating and reinforcing background knowledge, and providing access to variety of real-life like contents including internet sites, written and visual materials, images, etc. (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Thus, it appears that implementing novel technological educational interventions- whether blended or online – can complement traditional teaching methods to enhance the EFL learners' reading skill.

Online learning is available via internet. Online learning, characterized by its flexibility and accessibility, provides diverse tools such as adaptive learning platforms, multimedia resources, and self-paced modules. These platforms have been shown to improve learner autonomy and engagement (Sun & Chen, 2016). The learners also have higher and constant exposure to teaching content and guidance (Zubkov, 2020). It is also lower-cost and there is a comfortable environment for learning (Sun & Chen, 2016). However, studies highlight challenges such as reduced motivation, lack of real-time support, and limited opportunities for social interaction, which may hinder the progress of learners with weak linguistic backgrounds (Demuyakor, 2020; Eggers et al., 2021). Baczek, et al. (2021).

believe that in online learning, there is lack of interaction between learners and the teacher, there are hard to solve problems, technical matters and lack of screen focus.

Blended learning, by contrast, combines the advantages of both online and in-person learning environments, creating a more interactive and adaptable framework (Cronje, 2020). This approach combines the structure and immediacy of classroom teaching with the flexibility of digital tools, addressing the cognitive and emotional needs of learners more effectively (Halverson & Graham, 2019; Sahni, 2019). Menggo and Darong (2022) assert that blended learning has progressed in parallel with advancements in information and communication technology, cell phone learning, digital instructional materials and computers; it has come to be seen as an effective response to the repetitiveness of traditional teaching method, which often relies on face to face classroom instruction. Nevertheless, as they assert, this conventional approach still remains essential in fostering students` emotional growth. Furthermore, blended learning incorporates changing patterns of human interaction and technology (Abdullah, 2018). Research indicates that blended learning environments improve learner engagement, particularly for low-proficiency learners, by providing immediate feedback, personalized scaffolding, and collaborative opportunities (Djiwandono, 2018).

Numerous studies have explored the use of blended and online learning across different educational settings. For example, Norouzifard and Sadighi (2017) examined the effects of online versus traditional instruction on writing skills and found that online learning positively influenced EFL students' proficiency in organization, writing conventions, and word choice. Similarly, Kawinkoonlasate (2020) carried out a quasi-experimental study comparing traditional and online teaching methods on the writing performance of 60 EFL learners. The results showed that learners who received online instruction outperformed those in the traditional setting.

Sari and Wahyudin (2019) investigated learners' attitudes toward online English course. The participants were 116 undergraduate students who took general English for Business course. The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data gained from observation, questionnaire, and interview revealed that the majority

of students had highly favorable views about incorporating Instagram into their learning. This social media platform was found to enhance their motivation, participation, and overall attitudes toward learning.

Within the Iranian EFL context, Alipour (2020) explored the impact of lecture-based, online, and blended learning approaches on vocabulary acquisition among intermediate EFL learners. The study, which involved both pre-tests and post-tests, showed that students in the online and blended learning groups performed better. However, the findings also indicated that there was no significant difference in outcomes between the online and blended learning methods. Menggo and Darong (2022) studied the impact of blended learning in ESL/EFL in quantitative explanatory research. The analysis of data indicated that blended learning strengthens English students` competence, autonomy, learning motivation and computer literacy.

Dousti and Amirian (2023) evaluated the effectiveness of technology enhanced, blended, and online instructional methods on the writing proficiency of EFL learners in Iran. A total of 49 participants with similar learning backgrounds were randomly placed into three different groups. The findings showed that learners in all three groups demonstrated improvement in their writing performance from the pre-test to the post-test. Additionally, the blended and web-mediated groups outperformed the purely online group, a result attributed to the advantages of technology integration, interactive learning, and traditional educational elements. AlManafi et al., (2023) examined how blended learning influences the reading comprehension skills of Libyan EFL primary students. This quasi-experimental research revealed a statistically significant improvement in the reading abilities of students who participated in the blended learning group.

In their study, Wang et al. (2024) explored how blended learning affects English learners' speaking and listening skills through a quasi-experimental design. Participants completed pre-tests, post-tests, and structured interviews. The results indicated that blended learning significantly enhanced learners' proficiency in both speaking and listening. Bersamin et al. (2024) evaluated the effect of blended learning on reading comprehension among Thai students enrolled in vocational education. Statistical analysis of pre-test and post-test results showed notably high reading scores and a strong level of satisfaction with the blended learning approach. Tsegaye and Belihu (2024) also explored the strength and limitations of blended learning in enhancing EFL learners' comprehension. Using a mixed method approach with 36 first year students, the research found that students appreciated the flexibility, engagement and access to diverse learning materials offered by blended learning.

In most Iranian EFL contexts, teaching reading comprehension to non-English majors has predominantly relied upon traditional lecture-based methods. Although development of reading comprehension skills is fundamental for effectively engaging with academic materials and acquiring specialized knowledge across disciplines, learners often fail to achieve the desired proficiency levels (Amanafi et al., 2023). This challenge may stem from malfunctions in lecture-based reading comprehension courses leading to passive learners and diminished motivation. According to Moradimokhles and Hwang (2022), there is an increasing need for effective methods that promote personal growth, create engaging educational environments and foster advanced learning and thinking skills. Online and blended learning approaches have emerged as promising alternatives to address these issues (Almanafi et al., 2023; Tsegaye & Belihu, 2024); thus, these methods may be better solutions. To the best knowledge of the researcher, there remains a paucity of comparative research on the efficiency of online and blended learning approaches particularly for low-proficiency EFL learners in reading comprehension courses in Iran. Therefore, this research aimed to address this gap by examining the effect of both these methods on improving reading comprehension ability among EFL learners with low linguistic proficiency in Iran. Although the main aim of the present study was to compare the effectiveness of online and blended learning, a traditional lecture-based group was included to serve as a control group and to allow for a more comprehensive comparison. Therefore, the effect of traditional instruction was also examined. This article seeks to address the following research questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant effect of online learning on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension skills?
2. Is there a statistically significant effect of blended learning on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension skills?
3. Is there a statistically significant effect of lecture-based method on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension skills?
4. Is there a significant difference in the reading comprehension mean scores of the online, blended and lecture-based groups?

Method

Participants

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The participants in this research included 200 undergraduate junior students (both male and female) aged 18 to 30, enrolled in three General English classes at the Islamic Azad university, Osku Branch. A total of 168 participants were selected for the study based on their performance on the Key English Test (KET), designed for elementary-level English learners. The selection criterion was falling within one standard deviation above or below the mean score, ensuring a relatively homogeneous group in terms of English proficiency. Among these, 18 students were assigned to a pilot group to test the instruments and procedures. The remaining 150 participants were then randomly and equally assigned to three groups (i.e., Online, Blended, and Lecture-based Control), with 50 students in each group.

The decision to include exactly 50 participants in each of the three main groups was based on methodological and statistical considerations. Equal group sizes help ensure more reliable statistical analysis, facilitate valid comparisons across instructional conditions, and reduce the potential impact of sample size imbalance on the results. After excluding participants outside one standard deviation from the mean based on the English proficiency test, we had a pool of 168 students, of whom 18 were used for piloting. The remaining 150 participants were then randomly assigned into three equal groups (n=50 per group) to maintain balance and comparability.

All groups, including the pilot group, had restricted English proficiency background, with their English background primarily limited to high school English courses. None of the participants had experience of attending English language institutes.

Materials

To ensure the participants' reading and writing proficiency was at a comparable level, the Key English Test (KET), a standardized exam designed for elementary-level English learners, was employed. This test comprises sections on reading, listening, speaking, and writing; however, due to practical limitations, only the reading and writing sections were administered, with a total score of 60 marks.

The participants' reading comprehension was assessed through a pre-test and post-test, administered at the beginning and end of the study, respectively. Both tests were researcher-designed and tailored to align with the objectives and content of the course textbook. Each test consisted of 60 multiple-choice items, assessing literal, inferential, and vocabulary-related comprehension, textual and grammatical structures within texts (Appendix A). The maximum score for each test was 20, with items weighted based on complexity and cognitive demand. The items were adapted from reading passages and exercises found in the university's standard general English textbook, which focuses on reading fluency and comprehension. The selected textbook, *Cover to Cover: Reading Comprehension and Fluency* (Day & Yamanaka, 2011), is commonly used in general English courses at Islamic Azad University and covers topics suitable for elementary-level learners, as determined by the participants' performance on the KET. The pre- and post-tests were piloted prior to the main study with 18 students (excluded from the main groups), and the calculated reliability index using KR-21 was 0.96, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The content validity was confirmed by three TEFL experts who reviewed the alignment between test items and instructional objectives.

Procedure

At the outset of the study and prior to the implementation of the treatment, the KET results were employed to confirm the homogeneity of the students across the online, blended, and traditional English learning groups during the first session. Following this, a pilot study (n = 18) was conducted over three sessions to measure the reliability of reading comprehension pre- and post-tests and to identify potential issues students might encounter. This step also aimed to streamline the treatment process in the main study, particularly regarding the stages and time management in each learning mode.

Based on the results of the pilot study, the researchers refined some comprehension questions to enhance clarity. Subsequently, the main research was carried out. Initially, the
reading comprehension pre-tests were administered to all three groups. In the blended and online groups, the teacher dedicated two sessions to explaining and modeling the instructional approach (e.g., preparatory sessions).

The Online group received instruction entirely through online platforms. The Blended group experienced a mixture of online instruction and in-person classroom activities. The Traditional group received instruction through conventional face-to-face teaching methods. After the treatment, the reading comprehension post-tests were applied across all three groups. The instructional and assessment phase extended over 16 sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. In total, six instructional units were covered, with each unit being delivered across two sessions. The researcher was responsible for conducting all instructional sessions

To ensure methodological rigor and internal validity, all three groups—Blended, Online, and Traditional—

were exposed to the same instructional content, teaching techniques, and assessment tools. The only manipulated variable was the mode of delivery, which varied in terms of technological integration. Participants in the Blended group received instruction through a carefully designed combination of face-to-face and online sessions. Learners attended classroom sessions for key activities while supplementing their learning through digital platforms, online sessions and virtual group discussions. In-person sessions took place in a physical classroom focusing on pre-reading (such as vocabulary previewing, activating prior knowledge, and predicting content, teaching main reading strategies specially skimming, scanning, predicting and summarizing,) and while-reading tasks (like identifying main ideas, making inferences, and analyzing both textual and grammatical structures within texts).

Online sessions were conducted via Skyroom creating online space where learners can take part in discussions, present their thoughts about what they have read, ask their questions and finally accomplish post-reading tasks including follow-up comprehension exercises. The students were encouraged to share their short-written reflections, maintain asynchronous group interaction and submit instructor-assigned tasks (for example, summary of the reading text) through WhatsApp and email. Real-time Feedback was provided during in-class or online sessions, while asynchronous feedback was delivered in written and audio formats. The feedback focused on various aspects of reading comprehension such as identifying main ideas, understanding vocabularies, textual and grammatical structures in context and answering comprehension questions. in context Assessments included in-class reading tasks, participation in class and online discussions, in class quizzes, submission of online assignments, and a final in class standardized reading comprehension test. (A sample of reading text has been provided in Appendix B)

The Online group completed all instructional sessions virtually, following the same pedagogical structure and task types as the Blended Group. Unlike the first experimental group, all three phases of pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading tasks (doing follow-up comprehension tasks, reflection and summarizing) were delivered online through Skyroom. All reading passages and related comprehension activities were completed synchronously during the online sessions, not individually at home. Just like blended learners, the students were persuaded to take part in discussions, present their thoughts and ask their questions and finally do comprehension tasks collaboratively. WhatsApp and email were implemented asynchronously to let learners share their written reflections, continue peer interactions and submit assignments. Real-time feedback was provided during online sessions, while asynchronous feedback was delivered in written and audio formats. The same feedback procedure was applied in this group as well. Assessment methods included online reading tasks, online weekly comprehension quizzes, participation in Skyroom discussions, submission of assignments, and a final in-class standardized reading comprehension test.

In the traditional learning group, learners received instruction exclusively in a face-to-face classroom setting with scheduled weekly sessions, using printed textbooks. The same reading passages and instructional procedures were followed. The pre-reading, while reading and post-reading stages were delivered using lecture-based methods. The students took part in group discussions; they were required to ask their questions to clarify comprehension problems and are also encouraged to present their thoughts based on what they have read. Generally speaking, communication and interaction took place directly in the classroom through teacher-student discussions, question and answer sessions, and group activities. Then, they started doing follow up comprehension tasks. At the end of the class, the learners were required to share their written reflections and submit assignments the next session. Real-time feedback was provided during in class sessions. The same feedback procedure was applied in this group as well. Assessments included weekly reading tasks, in-class quizzes, in class participation and a final in class standardized reading comprehension test.

Design and Statistical Analysis

The research employed a quasi-experimental design incorporating pre-test and post-test measures, along with a control group. The study consisted of three groups: two experimental groups and one control group. The independent variables were the modes of instruction – online, blended and lecture-based learning – while the dependent variable was the reading comprehension ability of EFL learners. The data were analysed using one-way ANCOVA to examine the effect of instructional method on the post-test scores while controlling for the pre-test scores. When significant group differences were found, Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc comparisons were conducted to identify specific group differences.

Results

To evaluate the homogeneity of the participants across the four groups—pilot, online, blended, and traditional—a One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test

was performed to assess the normality of the KET score distributions (Table 1).

D in Table 1 stands for the KS test statistics which measures the largest vertical distance between the sample`s empirical distribution and the theoretical distribution. The results (Table 1) showed that the scores followed a normal distribution in all groups: pilot group (D = .17, P = .55 > .05), online group (D = .10, P = .65 > .05), blended group (D = .07, P = .92 > .05), and traditional group (D = .10, P = .56 > .05). Subsequently, descriptive statistics were computed for the KET scores (Table 2).

According to the results in Table 2, the mean scores in four groups are close to one another. To probe whether the differences in mean scores are significant, one-way analysis of variance was conducted. The results are demonstrated in Table 3.

The comparison of language proficiency levels, as shown in Table 3, reveals that the difference is not statistically significant, F (2, 98) = .88, P = .42. Additionally, the effect size in Table 3 suggests that the groups being studied were similar in terms of homogeneity (eta squared = .01).

The results related to the main research questions began by checking whether the scores in the reading pretests and posttests followed a normal distribution in both experimental and control groups. This was done using the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (Table 4).

As indicated in Table 4, the pretest (D = .81, P > 0.05) and posttest (D = .94, P > 0.05) scores in the blended-learning group, the pretest (D = .91, P > 0.05) and posttest (D = .81, P > 0.05) scores in the online-learning group, and the pretest (D = .91, P > 0.05) and posttest (D = .93, P > 0.05) scores in the control group all had a normal distribution.

Subsequently, the learners' overall performance on the reading tests (pretest and posttest) was examined. Prior to the main analysis, the assumptions of linearity and normality were examined and confirmed, indicating no significant deviations from these assumptions. The results confirmed that the covariance matrices of the dependent variables were consistent across both control and experimental groups, F = 3.54, P > 0.001. Additionally, Levene's Test for Equality of Error Variances was conducted to verify whether the variances were homogeneous. The test results showed no significant differences in error variances among the three groups, F = 1.12, P > 0.05. With all assumptions met, the descriptive statistics for the reading post-test results among the three groups were calculated (Table 5).

Table 5 manifests considerable differences in the mean scores across groups. The Blended-learning group could achieve the highest mean score which indicates highly improved reading comprehension ability. Then, an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was performed to examine the impact of blended and online learning on reading comprehension outcomes for learners in EFL setting (see Table 6).

As shown in Table 6, after the reading pre-test scores were statistically controlled as covariate (F = 18.10, p > 0.05) in the analysis, the results indicated a significant and meaningful difference in reading comprehension ability across the control and experimental groups, as reflected in the effect size (η^2 = 0.19). The participants in the blended learning group showed a marked enhancement in reading comprehension performance. To determine which instructional groups differed significantly from one another, pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni adjustment were conducted. The results are presented in Table 7.

The pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences among all three groups. The participants in the Blended group outperformed those in the Online and Traditional groups, and the Online group also significantly outperformed the Traditional group. These findings support a progressive improvement in reading comprehension performance from Traditional instruction to Blended instruction. To examine within group progress, paired-sample t-tests were conducted comparing the pre-test and post-test scores for each group (Table 8).

According to Table 8, the results revealed significant gains in the reading comprehension scores from the pre-test to post-test in all three groups: Blended, t (49) = 22.29, p< .001; Online, t (49) = 12.46; and traditional, t(49) = 2.46, < .001. These findings suggest that while all instructional modes had some positive impact, the blended learning group achieved the most substantial improvement.

Table 1. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov in KET

Group	N	D (statistics)	absolute	positive	negative	Sig.
Pilot	18	.17	.17	.17	-.12	.55
Blended	50	.07	.07	.07	-.05	.92
Online	50	.10	.10	.10	-.08	.65
Traditional	50	.10	.09	.09	-.07	.56

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics in KET

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Pilot	18	29.10	5.90	1.24
Online	50	30.50	7.01	1.09
Blended	50	30.00	6.05	.93
Traditional	50	31.07	6.02	.91
Total	168	30.16	6.53	.65

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA Results

	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Effect Size a
Between Groups	74.60	2	38.18	.88	.42	.01
Within Groups	4021.38	98	42.58			
Total	4095.98	101				

Table 4. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov in KET

Group		D (statistics)	absolute	positive	negative	Sig.
Blended	Pretest	.81	.81	.68	-.81	> 0.05
	Posttest	.94	.94	.75	-.89	> 0.05
Online	Pretest	.91	.91	.70	-.91	> 0.05
	Posttest	.81	.81	.72	-.76	> 0.05
Traditional	Pretest	.91	.91	.69	-.87	> 0.05
	Posttest	.93	.93	.74	-.91	> 0.05

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Reading Comprehension Posttest Scores

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% confidence interval	
				Lower bound	Upper bound
Traditional	50	14.30	1.10	13.98	14.62
Online	50	15.60	1.20	15.26	15.94
Blended	50	17.10	1.00	16.81	17.39

Table 6. Univariate Analysis of Covariance Results

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta
Pretest	18.24	1	18.24	15.42	0.000	.09
Group	42.80	2	21.40	18.10	0.000	.19
Error	172.80	146	1.18			
Total	233.84	149				

Table 7. Post Hoc Comparisons for Reading Comprehension Posttest Scores

Group Comparison	Mean Difference	Std..Error	P	95% confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
Blended vs. Online	2.00	.45	.001	1.11	2.89
Blended vs Traditional	3.80	.48	.000	2.87	4.73
Online vs Traditional	1.80	.42	.004	.97	2.63

Table 8. Paired-Sample T-Test Results for Pre-test and Post-test Scores within Each Group

Group	N	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	t	df	P
Blended	50	9.40 (1.25)	14.80 (1.75)	22.29	49	< .001
Online	50	9.45 (1.30)	12.78 (1.65)	12.64	49	< .001
Traditional	50	9.35 (1.22)	10.10 (1.40)	2.46	49	< .001

Discussion

The present study investigated the effectiveness of three instructional modes – Blended, Online, and Traditional—on the reading comprehension performance of EFL learners with limited language proficiency. The results of the ANCOVA, after controlling for the pretest scores, revealed a statistically significant difference among the groups in the posttest scores. The post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni adjustment indicated that the Blended group significantly outperformed both the Online and the Traditional groups. Additionally, the Online group scored significantly higher than the Traditional group, highlighting a gradient in effectiveness across instructional methods. To further examine the internal improvement within each group, paired-sample t-tests were conducted. The results showed that all three groups experienced statistically significant gains from the pretest to posttest, indicating that each instructional mode had some positive effect on the learners' reading comprehension. Notably, the improvement in the Traditional group, although modest, was still statistically significant, confirming that the conventional lecture-based instruction remains beneficial, albeit less effective than modern alternatives.

The results are in line with the findings of Menggo and Darong (2022), who found that blended learning strengthen learners` competence, autonomy and learning motivation. Similarly, Alipour (2022) emphasized the role of technology-enhanced instruction in promoting learner engagement and autonomy which aligns well with the improved outcomes observed in the blended group. In addition, Barsamin et al. (2024) and Wang et al. (2024) highlighted that integrating digital tools into face-to-face instruction creates a more flexible and learner-centered environment—an advantage that appears to have contributed to the superior performance of the blended group in the present study. Finally, the results are consistent with those gained by Almanafi et al. (2023), whose work demonstrated the benefits of hybrid instruction in providing structured support while encouraging learner autonomy.

In the present study, the learners in the Blended group showed the most substantial improvement in their reading comprehension scores, both compared to their own pretest performance and relative to the other two groups. This significant gain can be attributed to the unique affordances of the blended learning environment, which combines the structure and accountability of face-to-face instruction with the flexibility and richness of online resources. Blended learning environments foster both autonomous and collaborative learning, permitting learners to engage with materials in a self-paced manner while benefiting from in-person guidance (Rafiee & Gilakjani, 2024). This dual exposure can enhance metacognitive awareness and reading strategy use, which are essential for improving reading comprehension among learners from non-English majors (Wang et al., 2024).

The motivational aspect of blended learning cannot be overlooked. According to Peng and Fu (2021), blended environments offer flexibility and reduce learner anxiety, which are critical factors for sustained engagement, especially among students with weak linguistic foundations. The participants, majoring in fields such as computer science and accounting, may have felt more confident and less stressed in a blended setup where digital resources and instructor feedback complemented each other.

The physical presence of instructors in face-to-face sessions fosters a greater sense of responsibility and accountability among learners. When students interact directly with their instructors, they are more likely to remain engaged, attend regularly, and complete assignments diligently. The immediacy of teacher feedback and the perception of being observed contribute to heightened academic commitment (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Face-to-face classroom interactions foster both academic engagement and the cultivation of a sense of community and accountability among learners. According to Skinner et al., (2022), learners tend to invest effort in their studies when they perceive their instructors as accessible and supportive. The real-time monitoring and immediate feedback inherent in physical classrooms create an environment where learners feel accountable for their academic performance, thus promoting persistence and higher achievement.

Moreover, the blended format may have supported different learning styles more effectively (Almanafi, 2023). Visual learners, for instance, could benefit from digital texts and videos, while those needing social interaction could still rely on classroom discussions. The opportunity to revisit online materials at any time might have also promoted deeper processing, particularly for low-proficiency learners who require repeated exposure. These pedagogical advantages align with cognitive load theory, suggesting that blended learning reduces extraneous cognitive load and increases germane load, ultimately supporting better comprehension outcomes.

The Online group also showed statistically significant improvement from pretest to posttest, though to a lesser extent than the Blended group. The increased performance may be attributed to the learners' exposure to digital reading materials, hypertext environments, and interactive platforms, which encouraged autonomy and time management (Peng & Fu, 2021). The flexibility of

online learning might have allowed learners to proceed at their own pace and revisit materials as needed, which can be particularly helpful for low-level readers.

However, the absence of face-to-face guidance likely limited the depth of learning (Skinner et al., 2022). Without immediate feedback and clarification from instructors, learners might have faced challenges in decoding complex texts or employing reading strategies effectively. Additionally, issues such as reduced motivation, lack of accountability, and digital fatigue may have interfered with optimal engagement (Wang et al., 2024). Recent studies have shown that students in online-only settings are more prone to procrastination and disengagement (Martin et al., 2022). These limitations may explain why the Online group outperformed the Traditional group, but did not reach the level of improvement observed in the Blended condition. This is aligned with previous research demonstrating that fully online environments often lack the immediacy of feedback and social presence necessary for deeper learning processes (Wang et al., 2024). In our context, the participants' weak English background further compounded these challenges, as self-directed learning skills, crucial for success in online education, were not fully developed.

The lecture-based control group, while providing a familiar and structured environment, lacked the interactive and student-centered features that are essential for developing higher-order reading comprehension skills. Passive instruction methods, characterized by teacher-centered lectures and minimal learner interaction, have been shown to limit opportunities for critical thinking and inferential reading (Luo & Zhu,2024). Research suggests that without active engagement strategies, students tend to adopt surface learning approaches, focusing on memorization rather than deep comprehension (Martin et al., 2022). In our study, the control group's traditional lecture-based format may have constrained the learners' ability to develop critical reading strategies, resulting in comparatively lower gains in reading comprehension. The students in this group may have relied heavily on the teacher as the sole source of input and feedback. This dependence could hinder the development of independent reading strategies and critical thinking skills. In the absence of digital tools, the learners might not have had sufficient opportunities to practice comprehension in authentic or meaningful contexts. These pedagogical constraints help explain why the Traditional group lagged behind the other two groups, despite showing a small yet significant gain over time. As pointed out by Almanafi et al., (2023), students exposed primarily to passive instructional modes exhibit lower intrinsic motivation and a reduced ability to apply reading strategies independently. This suggests that while lecture-based methods may provide a clear structure, they fall short in fostering the dynamic and participatory learning processes necessary for language development, especially for learners with limited proficiency. Therefore, the results underscore the need for more interactive and strategy-based approaches in reading instruction to maximize learning outcomes.

While the findings of this study contribute to the understanding of instructional mode effectiveness in EFL reading, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, although care was taken to balance the instructional delivery, uncontrollable external factors such as differences in internet access (especially in Online and Blended groups), and student attendance may have influenced the results to some extent. These contextual variables were not systematically controlled or measured. Second, the study relied solely on quantitative data—namely, pretest and posttest scores—to assess reading comprehension. Although these measures offer valuable insights, they may not fully capture the development of reading strategies, learner engagement, or affective factors. Including qualitative data such as learner reflections, interviews, or classroom observations could provide a more nuanced understanding of the learning process in each instructional context. Finally, while the post-hoc analysis clarified between-group differences, the study did not explore learners' preferences or perceptions of each instructional mode. Understanding how students respond to different environments could deepen interpretation of the outcomes and inform more learner-centered pedagogical choices in future research. This study provides evidence for the enhanced effectiveness of blended learning approaches over purely online or lecture-based instruction in enhancing English reading comprehension among low-proficiency learners from non-English majors. Extensive reading and blended strategy instruction have been shown to be particularly effective for improving reading comprehension in EFL contexts (Luo & Zhou 2024). Our results support these claims and suggest that combining extensive digital resources with classroom-based strategy instruction can yield substantial benefits for learners with limited language exposure. The findings suggest that Blended learning fosters deeper engagement, greater accountability, and more substantial development of inferencing and comprehension skills. In contrast, the limitations of purely online and traditional lecture-based methods underscore the necessity of interactive, student-centered learning environments, particularly for students with limited language proficiency.

From a pedagogical perspective, these results offer valuable implications. Educators are encouraged to adopt blended instructional models that integrate technology with active, face-to-face learning activities. Strategically designed blended instruction can maximize learners' cognitive engagement and facilitate higher-order thinking development (Alipour, 2020). Furthermore, curriculum designers should incorporate strategy instruction sessions alongside digital tools to provide scaffolding for learners struggling with reading comprehension. Institutions are also advised to provide professional development for instructors to design and implement blended learning frameworks effectively (Garone et al., 2022). By thoughtfully integrating technological innovations with pedagogical best practices, educators can better support diverse learner populations and foster more sustainable language development.

While the present study provided noteworthy perspective on the comparative effectiveness of blended, online, and lecture-based instruction on reading comprehension among low-proficiency EFL learners, further research is warranted to expand and deepen these findings. Future studies could explore the effects of blended learning across different proficiency levels and academic disciplines to assess the generalizability of the results. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking learners' progress over an extended period may lead to deeper insights into the impact of instructional modes on reading skill development across longer periods.

Moreover, it would be beneficial to investigate the specific components of blended learning – such as types of online activities, feedback mechanisms, and synchronous versus asynchronous interactions – that most significantly contribute to reading comprehension gains. Finally, experimental studies employing mixed-methods approaches, including qualitative interviews or learner diaries, could provide richer insights into students' perceptions and experiences in blended and online learning environments, thereby informing more targeted pedagogical interventions.

Authors Contribution
All authors have contributed equally to prepare the paper.

Availability of data and materials
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interests
The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A
Reading Comprehension Pre- and Posttest

Getting Enough Sleep

The lecture Hall is filled with about 60 is students all around 18 or 19 years old. The professor is explaining a point about economic theory to the class. It is 9 o'clock in the morning but some of the students seem to be finding it hard to stay awake. A few have nodded of completely. It could be that they are bored with the lecture. But, according to researchers it is more likely that they simply haven't had enough sleep.

Experts say that most teenagers need about nine hours of sleep a night. This is more than either adults or children need. For most adults, seven to eight hours a night is generally enough, although the exact amount is different for each person. infants who need about 16 hours a day, are the only age group that needs more sleep than teenagers.

However, research shows that many teenagers are not getting the amount of sleep they need. In one survey, around half the teenagers interviewed said they slept an average of 6 hours a night. That is three hours less than experts say they should get.

Teenagers aren't the only ones who aren't getting enough sleep. In many societies, sleep deprivation is becoming part of the culture. When people “work hard or play hard,” there is not much time left for sleep. These people often see the symptoms of sleep deprivation as part of normal life. For example, a person might think he or she is yawning because of boredom. In fact, experts say it means they probably haven't had enough sleep.

The problem can get worse over time. When people have two little sleep over a long period, they built up a “sleep debt.” If a person misses one hour of sleep every night for a week, then by the end of the week he or she will need to catch up on seven hours of sleep.

The effects of sleep deprivation can be serious. Research shows that people who don't get enough sleep find it hard to make decisions. Their work or studies can be badly affected. Their ability to drive car also be impaired. Thousands of traffic accidents each year are caused by sleep deprived people. In addition, long term sleep disorders can cause high blood pressure and may lead to heart attacks. Drinking coffee or soft drinks with caffeine cannot help people who are sleep deprived. There is only one thing to do if you feel sleepy: start going too bad earlier.

Answer the following Questions:

1. How old were most of the students?
A. 16–17 B. 17–18 C. 18–19 D. 19–20
2. What should you do if you feel sleepy?
A. drinking tea B. taking medicine C. going to bed earlier D. skipping breakfast
3. How many hours of sleep do experts say teenagers need?
A. 6 hours B. 7 hours C. 8 hours D. 9 hours
4. What subject was the professor teaching?
A. psychology B. economics C. biology D. literature
5. According to the passage, why were some students falling asleep?
A. the room was too hot B. they were bored
C. they hadn’t had enough sleep D. they ate too much breakfast
6. Who needs the most sleep according to the text?
A. teenagers B. adults C. infants D. elderly people
7. What term does the text use for the amount of lost sleep?
A. sleep account B. sleep debt C. sleep disorder D. sleep deficit
8. What can’t replace sleep, according to experts?
A. exercise B. coffee and soft drinks C. short naps D. vitamins
9. What can sleep deprivation cause while driving?
A. faster reaction times B. impaired driving
C. increased attention D. improved concentration
10. What health problem can long-term sleep disorders lead to?
A. diabetes B. obesity C. heart attacks D. cancer
11. How many hours of sleep do most adults need?
A. 5–6 B. 7–8 C. 8–9 D. 9–10
12. How long does an infant usually sleep each day?
A. 10 hours B. 12 hours C. 14 hours D. 16 hours
13. Why might students fall asleep in the morning class?
A. morning light causes sleep B. they didn’t rest enough the night before
C. the topic is too advanced D. the class is too short
14. What does the text indicate about modern lifestyles?
A. people sleep more than they used to B. sleep deprivation has become normal

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C. workplaces encourage long sleep D. teenagers rest more than adults
15. The term “sleep debt” suggests that sleep is like:
A. a game B. money you owe C. a gift D. a test
16. Why do people think yawning means boredom?
A. because they are not aware of sleep deprivation B. because scientists say so
C. because they want attention D. because they are tired of studying
17. What can be inferred about caffeine?
A. it replaces sleep B. it can cure sleep disorders
C. it is good only for a short time D. it makes people sleepier
18. What might happen if someone keeps missing sleep for months?
A. their body will get use to completely B. they might develop serious health problems
C. they will become immune to tiredness D. they will stop feeling sleepy
19. Why does the text compare teenagers’ sleep needs to other age groups?
A. to show that all people need the same rest B. to show teenagers’ higher sleep needs
C. talk about adult habits D. to explain problems from getting older
20. The professor’s topic shows:
A. the subject of the lecture B. why students were bored
C. that the time of day affects attention D. that economics is difficult
21. What might happen to a person’s work performance if they don’t sleep enough?
A. it will get better B. it will not change C. it will decrease D. it will cause creativity
22. Why is sleep deprivation said to be part of the culture?
A. people tell others they sleep more B. society values hard work
C. sleeping too much is fashionable D. sleep is considered unnecessary
23. What does the writer suggest about “catching up” on sleep?
A. it is possible after losing some sleep B. you can get better
C. It needs medicine D. It’s harmful
24. What does the phrase “play hard” imply?
A. working outdoors B. having an active life C. Studying hard D. Playing video games
25. The word “filled” means:
A. covered B. completed C. full of D. painted
26. The word “theory” means:
A. fact B. guess C. scientific explanation D. dream
27. The word “deprivation” most closely means:
A. fullness B. lack C. addition D. rest
28. The word “survey” means:
A. study B. newspaper C. game D. a place to learn
29. The word “impaired” means:
A. improved B. damaged C. slowed D. cured
30. The word “disorders” refers to:
A. problems or illnesses B. sleeping pills C. Exercise routines D. Healthy habits
31. The phrase “build up a debt” means:
A. collect money B. owe something C. reduce work D. pay extra
32. The word “boredom” refers to:
A. being tired of something B. being sick C. being excited D. being afraid
33. The word “affect” in “their work can be badly affected” means:
A. improved B. changed negatively C. ignored D. observed
34. The expression “catch up on sleep” means:
A. sleep less B. recover lost sleep C. avoid sleeping D. work faster
35. “Sleep deprivation” has closet meaning to:
A. too much sleep B. not enough sleep C. sleeping well D. extra rest
36. “Infants” means:
A. teenagers B. adults C. babies D. elderly people
37. What is the main idea of the passage?
A. teenagers enjoy sleeping B. Many people don’t get enough sleep
C. lectures are boring D. sleep is a waste of time
38. How is the text organized?
A. by comparing countries B. by explaining causes and effects
C. by listing opinions only D. by describing a story chronologically
39. The first paragraph serves to:
A. present research data B. introduce a common situation
C. define key terms D. conclude the text
40. The word “however” in the passage signals:

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A. addition B. contrast C. example d. Result
41. The linking word “for example” is used to:
A. introduce an example B. add a cause C. express contrast D. show time
42. The phrase “when people work hard or play hard” indicates a:
A. time relationship B. contrast C. result D. definition
43. The expression “in addition” is used in the text to:
A. add more information B. introduce contrast C. indicate result D. start conclusion
44. Which connector could correctly complete this sentence? “Teenagers sleep less than they should; ___, they often feel tired at school.”
A. because B. therefore C. however D. for example
45. What is the tone of the passage?
A. humorous B. informative and serious C. angry D. casual
46. What is the writer’s purpose?
A. to persuade people to avoid caffeine B. to inform readers about sleep deprivation
C. to talk about education problems D. To compare sleep patterns of countries
47. A single word for compare and contrast is:
A. cause B. both C. first D. finally
48. The word “but” in paragraph 1, is s single word for:
A. cause and effect B. compare and contrast C. description D. chronological
49. Which sentence is grammatically correct?
A. he don’t get enough sleep. B. he doesn’t gets enough sleep.
C. he doesn’t get enough sleep. D. he not get enough sleep.
50. The negative form of “can cause” is:
A. cannot cause B. can’t causing C. don’t cause D. doesn’t cause
51. The sentence “They build up a sleep debt” — what is the subject?
A. they B. build C. sleep D. debt
52. The correct preposition for “filled ___ about 60 students” is:
A. of B. in C. with D. by
53. The correct plural form of “sleep disorder” is:
A. sleep disorders B. sleeps disorder C. sleep disorder’s D. sleep disordres
54. The word “haven’t had” is an example of:
A. present perfect tense B. past perfect C. simple past D. future tense
55. Choose the correct form: “Teenagers ___ about 9 hours of sleep.”
A. need B. needs C. needing D. needed
56. Fill in the blank: “Many students ___ sleepy in the morning.”
A. is B. are C. am D. be
57. Choose the correct negative: “They ___ get enough sleep last night.”
A. didn’t B. doesn’t C. don’t D. isn’t
58. Choose the correct comparative form: “Sleep deprivation is ___ for teenagers than adults.”
A. more serious B. serious C. most serious D. seriously
59. Fill in the blank: “If a person misses one hour of sleep every night, they ___ catch up later.”
A. can B. cannot C. could D. may
60. Select the correct word order: “Adults usually need seven to eight hours of sleep.”
A. Usually adults need seven to eight hours of sleep
B. Adults usually need seven to eight hours of sleep
C. Adults need usually seven to eight hours of sleep
D. Need adults usually seven to eight hours of sleep

A sample of Reading Text
The Couple That Loves Weddings

It is a happy wedding day. The bride and groom are congratulated by their friends and relatives. Everyone is having a wonderful time at the wedding party. But this is not the first time that Maria Foti has celebrated her wedding. In fact, it is her 30th wedding party. But she has married the same man each time. The couple told their story to Reflections magazine.

Antonio Forti was 19 years old when he first saw Maria Santos. He was working at his father's store. Antonio smiles as he remembers that day. Maria came into the store to buy some food, he says. Maria was unable to find what she wanted, so she asked Antonio. "I could only stare at her," says Antonio. "I thought Maria was the most beautiful girl in the world." He promised himself that he would marry her.

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Unfortunately for Antonio, Maria was just a young girl, only 17 years old. She was still in high school, but Antonio did not want to wait. He asked his father to talk to Maria's father, Mr. Santos. Antonio's father thought his son was too young to get married, but Antonio kept asking, so Mr. Forti went to talk to Maria's father.

Mr. Forti told Mr. Santos that his son wanted to marry Maria. Both fathers thought that Maria was too young. Mr. Santos wanted them to wait one year until Maria was 18 and she had finished high school. Antonio was unhappy with the decision. He was impatient, but he had no choice. "That one year seemed like 10 years for me," he says.

When Maria finished high school, her father told her that she could marry Antonio. Maria and Antonio were married on July 4, 1954. Neither family had a lot of money, so they had a small wedding ceremony. After the wedding, there was a small party at the restaurant. Everyone had a lot of fun eating, dancing, and singing. Maria and Antonio were very happy.

After one year of marriage, they wanted to have another wedding. They asked the priest who had married them if it was possible to do it again, and they had another party at the same restaurant. Like the first time, everyone had fun. Now, every July 4, they have another wedding and a party for their relatives and friends at the usual restaurant. Unlike the first wedding and party, many people attend, including Maria and Antonio’s children and grandchildren.

Biodata

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