

**Unpacking Blended Learning in Higher Education: An Inductive Analysis of  
English Second Language Teaching Practices at Tabuk University**

**by  
Omawathie Ramlakan**

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**Supervisor: Dr L. L. Mbatha**

**2024**

## **Supervisor's Authorisation**

I, Dr Lynette Lulama Mbatha, the candidate's supervisor, agree to the submission of this thesis for examination.

Signature:



Date: 23/10/2024

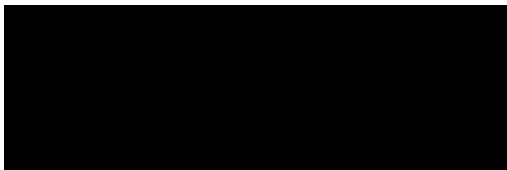
## Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment of the academic requirements for the degree of Master of Education, in Educational Leadership, Management and Policy, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

I, Omawathie Ramlakan, hereby declare that:

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to educators who are passionate about education and change.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am deeply grateful for the invaluable guidance, mentorship, and understanding provided by my supervisor, Dr Lynette Mbatha. Her dedication and support have been instrumental in shaping my research endeavour.

I express my heartfelt gratitude to my children, Nitesh Diahnan and Mayuri Diahnan, for their constant, unwavering support, inspiration, and encouragement throughout my academic journey.

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I am grateful to Tabuk University for allowing me to conduct my research, observe ESL classes, interview educators, and hold focused group discussions with female ESL students.

I want to express my gratitude to Gill Hannant for editing my dissertation.

## **Abstract**

As a result of COVID-19, universities worldwide, including Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia, have adopted blended learning for teaching English as a second language. This study explored the implementation of blended learning in English as a Second Language (ESL) education, focusing on its impact on language learning outcomes. Qualitative methodology was selected for its suitability. This study adopted an interpretive paradigm and employed an inductive approach to analyse data. The study investigated the perceptions of both educators and students regarding the effectiveness of blended learning practices. The research objectives included examining the benefits and challenges of blended learning, exploring how educators integrate technology into their teaching practices, and evaluating the impact of blended learning on language learning outcomes. Data generation methods included interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions, providing rich insights into participants' experiences. The findings suggest that blended learning offers numerous benefits for ESL education, such as enhanced student engagement, high cognitive presence, and positive teaching presence. Educators leverage digital technologies and innovative instructional approaches to create engaging and interactive learning environments that cater to diverse student needs. However, challenges related to technology integration, cultural barriers, and limited English usage outside the classroom were also identified. Despite these challenges, educators firmly commit to overcoming barriers and supporting student learning through blended learning initiatives. The study highlights the importance of ongoing training and support for educators to effectively integrate technology into their teaching practices. Recommendations for further research include exploring the design and implementation of assessment strategies in blended learning environments, investigating the impact of cultural factors on language learning outcomes, and examining best practices for promoting language usage outside blended learning settings. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to improving ESL education through blended learning approaches.

**Keywords:** Blended Learning, Community of Inquiry (COI), Technological Integration, English as a Second Language (ESL)

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## **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CELTA	Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults
COI	Community of Inquiry
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease of 2019
ESL	English Second Language
MBA	Master of Business Administration
SMART objectives:	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound objectives
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
TPR	Total Physical Response
WHO	World Health Organisation

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019, with the first cases reported in Wuhan, China, necessitated changes across various countries and sectors in their ways of operating. This global crisis significantly impacted the educational sector, compelling universities that traditionally offered face-to-face instruction to change their teaching modes. Consequently, blended learning, which combines traditional in-person teaching methods with online educational activities, has gained prominence as a flexible and practical approach to meet the evolving needs of students and educators during and post-pandemic. This learning mode enables educators to assess student knowledge more accurately and promote efficient teaching of various concepts. The present research investigated effective strategies used in blended learning classes and how they enhance academic achievement among English Second Language (ESL) university students. This chapter clarifies the study's background, problem statement, rationale, significance, methodology, theoretical framework, Community of Inquiry (COI), and definition of terms. The chapter concludes with an overview of how the thesis is demarcated.

### **1.2 Background to the Study**

As alluded to in the introduction, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019 necessitated rapid and unprecedented changes across various sectors worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020). Among the most significantly impacted was the educational sector. Traditional face-to-face learning environments quickly shifted to online platforms to adhere to social distancing measures and maintain educational continuity (Dhawan, 2020): this sudden shift exposed opportunities and challenges in integrating digital technologies into educational practices. As the pandemic's effects persisted, the hybrid approach of blended learning, combining online digital media with traditional classroom methods, emerged as a sustainable model for the future of education (Hodges et al., 2020).

Blended learning's rise in popularity can be attributed to its flexibility, accessibility, and potential to enhance student engagement through personalised learning experiences (Graham, 2013). For universities, particularly those in regions like Saudi Arabia, where educational reform is a critical national priority, the transition to blended learning represented a significant shift in pedagogical approaches (Al Lily et al., 2020). At Tabuk University, adopting blended learning has been incredibly transformative in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL).

Blended learning offers a unique opportunity to leverage the strengths of both online and face-to-face instruction, allowing for more interactive and diversified learning experiences (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). However, this approach also presents challenges, including technological barriers, varying levels of digital literacy among educators and students, and cultural factors that influence the learning environment (Al-Jarf, 2020). These complexities are particularly pronounced in ESL education, where language proficiency and cultural sensitivity are critical (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

This study aims to explore the implementation of blended learning in ESL education at Tabuk University, focusing on its impact on language learning outcomes, the integration of technology in teaching practices, and the perceptions of both educators and students. In examining these aspects through qualitative methods, including interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions, this research sought to comprehensively understand the benefits and challenges of blended learning in ESL instruction.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the implementation and effectiveness of blended learning in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) education at Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia. My research examined the advantages and challenges of integrating blended learning into ESL instruction. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate the effect of blended learning on students' English language proficiency and engagement (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Additionally, it investigated the perceptions of ESL educators regarding the benefits and challenges of blended learning, including how they integrated technology into their teaching practices and adapted instructional strategies to meet diverse student needs (Graham, 2006). The study also sought to identify and analyse the technological barriers and cultural factors that affected the implementation of blended learning in ESL instruction and to explore how these challenges could be mitigated to enhance the learning experience (Van Blerk, 2019).

Ultimately, the study aimed to develop actionable recommendations for educators, administrators, and policymakers to optimise the integration of blended learning in ESL programmes, ensuring effectiveness, equity, and sustainability. Through addressing these objectives, the study aimed to highlight and contribute to the broader discourse on blended learning in higher education, particularly within language instruction, and provide insights that could inform future educational practices and policies (Vaughan, 2010).

This study examined how ESL educators at Tabuk University integrated technology and adapted their teaching strategies to meet diverse student needs in a blended learning environment. It also explored the challenges posed by technological barriers and cultural factors, aiming to provide actionable recommendations for optimising the effectiveness, equity, and sustainability of blended learning in ESL programmes.

An ideal scenario for blended learning in ESL instruction involves a seamless integration of face-to-face teaching and online resources, creating an engaging and interactive learning environment tailored to the diverse needs of students. According to Graham (2006), effective blended learning should incorporate various instructional strategies, enabling educators to personalise learning experiences and enhance student engagement. Policies should support this by providing teachers with the necessary technological infrastructure and professional development, ensuring they can effectively utilise digital tools (Kintu et al., 2020). In this optimal setting, students benefit from flexible learning pathways that encourage group and paired work, critical thinking, and language practice in real-world contexts, ultimately leading to improved language proficiency and

academic success. By fostering a culture of inclusivity and continuous support, blended learning can significantly enhance the educational experience for ESL students (Van Blerk, 2019).

#### **1.4 Statement of the Problem**

The background of the study discussed the context in which universities transition to blended learning. The background also implied that blended learning comes with challenges and opportunities for students, and these can adversely impact their motivation, language proficiency, and overall academic success (Kuo & Anderson, 2010; Li & Wang, 2022). My research explored the benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction. While blended learning has been identified as a promising approach that offers autonomy, interactivity, and multimedia support (Burrell & Lee, 2020), its implementation within ESL contexts remains inconsistent and under-researched.

Despite the widespread adoption of blended learning across universities, many institutions struggle to effectively deliver this approach to ESL students. This inadequacy may stem from various factors, including technological accessibility, internet connectivity issues, and insufficient training for educators in utilizing technology in blended learning environments (Graham & Vaughan, 2008; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). These barriers can hinder the adoption of blended learning, particularly in Saudi Arabian universities, where students may lack reliable access to digital devices and online resources (Alshahrani, 2021). Furthermore, ESL students often grapple with language barriers and cultural differences, necessitating additional support and resources from educators to foster their success in a blended learning setting.

Although blended learning has garnered significant attention in educational research, a notable gap exists in understanding its specific implementation and impact on ESL students. Thus, there is a critical need for an inductive analysis of blended learning practices, particularly within the ESL department at Tabuk University, to explore its strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas for improvement.

This research aimed to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing insights into the effectiveness of blended learning strategies in enhancing language proficiency and academic

achievement for ESL students. In addressing these gaps, the study sought to offer practical recommendations for improving the implementation of blended learning in ESL contexts, thereby supporting the academic success of these students. My research also explored the benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction.

Despite the growing emphasis on blended learning as a practical approach for boosting ESL instruction, significant challenges hinder its successful implementation. For instance, inadequate technological infrastructure and limited access to digital tools prevent many educators from fully integrating online components into their teaching practices, resulting in a gap between the potential benefits of blended learning and the realities teachers and students face (Kintu et al., 2020). Furthermore, varying levels of digital literacy among educators add to inconsistencies in the effective use of these tools, creating disparities in learning outcomes and highlighting the urgent need for tailored solutions to address these issues in the ESL context.

Studying the research problem for practical and academic reasons is very important. Knowing the challenges and benefits of blended learning in ESL teaching can help teachers use better methods to engage students and improve their understanding. From a research point of view, looking into this topic adds to what we already know by showing what is missing or not working in current teaching methods. By carefully examining these problems, teachers and decision-makers can create solutions based on facts that improve blended learning, leading to improved education in universities.

### **1.5 Research Objectives and Questions**

My research objectives were the following:

1. To investigate the integration of blended learning in the teaching practices of ESL educators.
2. To explore the perceived benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction.
3. To examine the perceptions of ESL students on the effectiveness and impact of blended learning on their language learning outcomes.

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do ESL educators integrate blended learning into their teaching practices?
2. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction?

### **1.6 The Significance of the Study**

The reason for conducting this study was threefold (personal, professional and theoretical) (Akanle & Shittu 2020). Personally, as an ESL educator at Tabuk University, I have first-hand experience and insights into implementing blended learning in ESL teaching. Conducting this study allowed me to contribute to the existing knowledge base by exploring and understanding the specific practices and challenges of blended learning in the context of ESL education at Tabuk University. This personal connection drives my desire to explore the nuances of blended learning and its impact on language acquisition, and it may provide unique perspectives and insights that can inform and improve my teaching practices.

Professionally, the study can benefit other institutions of higher learning, educators, administrators, and stakeholders in Tabuk University's ESL education. In examining the impact of blended learning on ESL student learning outcomes, the study can provide evidence-based recommendations and strategies for enhancing ESL instruction in a blended learning environment. The study may improve teaching methodologies, curriculum development, and student support services, benefitting ESL students and the university.

The study investigated how the students' attitudes, satisfaction, convenience, engagement, and learning in blended learning affect their academic achievements and whether blended learning enhances their critical thinking skills and competencies. This research study aims to contribute to academia by filling the gap in studying blended learning among ESL university students. Recent literature highlights several challenges in blended learning, including technological barriers such as inadequate internet access and outdated hardware, obstructing the smooth integration of online components. Additionally, varying levels of digital literacy among educators and students create discrepancies in the effective use of digital tools, impacting the quality of the learning experience. Cultural factors, such as discomfort with using technology in educational

settings or resistance to new teaching methods, further complicate the adoption of blended learning models, emphasizing the need for tailored solutions based on current knowledge (Kintu et al., 2020).

However, while studies acknowledge technological barriers, detailed empirical evidence does not examine how these issues differ based on geographical context or socio-economic status. Additionally, limited research explores the long-term impact of digital literacy gaps on student outcomes in blended learning, especially in under-resourced regions. This research is conducted in Saudi Arabia, where all students have a monthly allowance of 980 SAR. This financial support can be allocated towards purchasing technology and ensuring reliable internet connectivity, which is essential for participating in blended learning environments. These gaps highlight the need for more comprehensive research to understand how these factors interact in diverse educational environments.

Lastly, the theoretical framework for this study is rooted in the Community of Inquiry (COI) model, which emphasises the interplay of social, cognitive, and teaching presence in online and blended learning environments (Garrison et al., 2000). Applying the COI framework, this research analyses how these three presences manifest in blended learning contexts concerning language acquisition. Additionally, the study incorporates Van Blerk's categories and indicators to explore further the dynamics of social and cognitive presence within the ESL learning environment. This theoretical grounding provides a comprehensive understanding of blended learning's impact on student engagement and educational outcomes.

### **1.7 Theoretical Framework Community of Inquiry (COI) Framework**

Among the theories applicable to this research study, the COI framework developed by Garrison et al. (2010) was the most relevant to my research study as it provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors contributing to successful blended learning environments. A more detailed discussion of the theoretical framework is provided in Chapter 3.

## **1.8 Research Design and Methodology**

The study was located within the interpretive paradigm and focused on understanding human experiences and meanings (Babbie, 2020). The interpretive paradigm helped me understand how blended learning can enhance ESL learning and contribute to academic achievement. I used three data generation techniques: observations, interviews, and focus group discussions to gain insight into the beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of educators and students regarding blended learning in the context of ESL instruction. The research design and methodology used in this study and ethical considerations are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

## **1.9 Clarification of Key Concepts**

Some of the key concepts and practices within blended learning in higher education are explained below:

### *1.9.1 Blended learning*

According to Hrastinski (2019), blended learning combines traditional face-to-face and online learning activities. Hrastinski (2019) emphasises that blended learning is not just about combining these two modes but also finding the right balance to enhance learning outcomes. He highlights that blended learning should be designed to take advantage of the strengths of both in-person and online environments, creating a more effective and engaging educational experience for students.

### *1.9.2 Online Learning*

Online learning, also known as e-learning or distance learning, is a method of education that occurs over the Internet. It allows students to access course materials, participate in discussions, and complete assignments remotely, often at their own pace. This form of learning can include various formats, such as video lectures, interactive modules, and virtual classrooms, providing flexibility and accessibility to students regardless of their geographic location (Means et al., 2010).

### *1.9.3 Face-to-face instruction*

Face-to-face instruction, also known as in-person or traditional classroom instruction, is a method of teaching where the instructor and students are physically present in the exact location. This approach involves direct interaction between educators and students and allows real-time communication, fostering a collaborative and interactive learning environment (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Prince, 2004).

### *1.9.4 Synchronous Learning*

Synchronous learning refers to online or distance education where instructors and students interact in real-time. This learning mode typically involves live video conferences, chat sessions, or webinars, allowing participants to communicate and collaborate simultaneously. Synchronous learning enables immediate feedback and dynamic interaction, closely mimicking the experience of face-to-face instruction (Hrastinski, 2008).

### *1.9.5 Asynchronous Learning*

Learning activities that occur at various times, allowing students to access course materials and complete tasks at their own pace, are often facilitated through online discussion forums or prerecorded lectures (Hrastinski, 2008).

### *1.9.6 Personalised Learning:*

Pane et al. (2015) defines personalised learning as an educational approach that tailors instruction to meet each student's needs, preferences, and learning pace. This learning involves customising various aspects of the learning experience, such as content, teaching methods, and assessment strategies, to align with a student's unique strengths and goals. The aim is to provide a more relevant and effective learning journey that maximises each student's potential.

## **1.10 Structure of the Dissertation**

The remainder of my dissertation is organised into seven chapters, as outlined below:

Chapter 1 elucidates various aspects of the study, including its background, problem statement, justification, significance, study site, research approach, methodology, theoretical underpinning using the COI framework, constraints, and clarification of key terms.

Chapter 2 focuses on the literature review, with the primary objective of delving into the existing research concerning the influence of blended learning on the academic achievement of ESL university students. This chapter comprehensively examines the existing literature to identify gaps in current research.

Chapter 3 expands on the COI theoretical framework initially formulated by Garrison et al. (2001). The COI framework postulates that effective online learning environments necessitate the presence of three key elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. These three concepts are comprehensively discussed, followed by how the theory is applied in this study and different contexts.

Chapter 4 explains the research methodology employed in this study. It further provides the study's population and sample, the research paradigm, and the research instruments and techniques used to select the population and the sample. Lastly, it covers the issues of reliability, validity, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 presents the data collected, highlighting key themes and patterns from the study. It does this by summarising data generated from face-to-face interviews, observation of classroom practice, and the five focus groups.

Chapter 6 unveils the research findings and includes detailed analyses of participants' perspectives and experiences. The findings aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, offering valuable insights and implications.

Chapter 7, the conclusion, discusses the implications of the research findings and their relevance to the field. This chapter also addressed the study's limitations and suggested areas for future research.

## **1.11 Chapter Summary**

This chapter provides an overview of the critical elements of the study, beginning with the introduction, background, and purpose, followed by the problem statement, research objectives, and questions. It also outlines the rationale for the study, positioning it within the theoretical framework of the Community of Inquiry (COI) model. The research design and methodology are explained, along with clarifying key concepts relevant to the study. Additionally, the chapter addresses the structure of the dissertation and highlights its limitations. The final section explains how the thesis is demarcated. In the subsequent chapter, Chapter 2, the literature review will analyse and evaluate scholarly works from books, articles, and other sources relevant to the study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Blended learning, which combines online and face-to-face instructional methods experiences (Garrison & Kanuka 2004), has gained significant attention in higher education as a promising approach to enhancing student learning outcomes. In ESL teaching, blended learning has great potential for improving language proficiency, academic achievement, and student satisfaction (Tran & Hoa, 2024, p. 183).

This chapter reviews literature that aims to explore the existing research on the impact of blended learning on student academic achievement in ESL university education. It begins by highlighting the historical importance of blended learning in promoting academic achievement, drawing upon the findings of previous studies. It then examines the advantages of blended learning, such as personalised instruction, increased opportunities for practice and interaction, and improved student attitudes toward learning. The review further discusses studies that have examined the relationship between blended learning and academic achievement in ESL university students.

This chapter aims to comprehensively understand blended learning on student academic achievement in ESL university education by synthesising the existing literature. Additionally, it seeks to identify gaps in the current research and set the foundation for the present study. It aims to investigate the attitudes, satisfaction, convenience, engagement, and learning experiences of ESL female undergraduate university students at Tabuk University concerning blended learning.

#### **2.2 What is Blended Learning?**

In the last decade, blended learning has become a prominent topic of discussion, particularly in higher education, yet it is defined differently. Blended learning is an educational model combining traditional face-to-face teaching methods with online learning activities, allowing for a more flexible and personalised learning experience (Graham, 2006). Similarly, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) define blended learning as a process that merges the best aspects of classroom

instruction and digital resources, creating a hybrid environment that enhances student engagement and knowledge retention. This approach enables educators to design courses that take advantage of the immediacy and interaction of in-person teaching while utilising the accessibility and resources available online. They argue that integrating these modalities, blended learning facilitates a more comprehensive educational experience that can cater to diverse learning styles and preferences.

Furthermore, Vaughan (2007) emphasises that blended learning promotes active learning and student autonomy, enabling students to take control of their educational journey. In this model, students can engage with course materials at their own pace, revisit lectures, and participate in discussions through online forums, thereby fostering more profound understanding and critical thinking skills. According to Hrastinski (2019), blended learning combines traditional face-to-face and online learning activities. Hrastinski (2019) emphasises that blended learning is not just about combining these two modes but also finding the right balance to enhance learning outcomes. He highlights that blended learning should be designed to take advantage of the strengths of both in-person and online environments, creating a more effective and engaging educational experience for students.

One common theme in definitions of blended learning is the emphasis on flexibility. Many scholars highlight that blended learning allows students to learn at their own pace and on their schedule, combining in-person interactions with digital resources. This flexibility can cater to diverse learning preferences and needs, making education more inclusive and personalised.

(Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). In this study, I adopted Graham's definition: blended learning is an educational model that combines traditional face-to-face teaching methods with online learning activities (Graham, 2006).

### **2.3 Historical Origins and Contextualising of Blended Learning Approach**

As alluded to in Chapter 1 and the previous section, blended learning is the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences (Graham, 2006; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Blended learning creates a holistic and practical learning experience, providing a more flexible and personalised learning experience that allows for various

instructional strategies, such as flipped classrooms, online discussions, multimedia presentations, interactive simulations, and self-paced modules (Graham, 2006; Hwang & Lai, 2017). In its simplest explanation, blended learning aims to combine face-to-face and online settings, resulting in better learning engagement and flexible learning experiences, with rich settings that further use a simple online content repository to support face-to-face classes.

The history of blended learning can be traced back to Sir Isaac Pitman, who used distance education in the 1840s to teach shorthand through mailing texts transcribed to shorthand on postcards and receiving transcriptions from his students. Graham (2006) has significantly contributed to blended learning by defining its key components, benefits, and challenges. He has provided a comprehensive framework that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning activities, emphasising the importance of balancing these elements to enhance educational outcomes. Graham (2006) highlights how blended learning could improve access to education, offer flexible learning opportunities, and support diverse learning needs. Additionally, he stresses the necessity for institutional support, effective instructional design, and the development of faculty skills for successful implementation. His work has provided a basic understanding for educators and researchers, helping them create new and effective blended learning environments and methods. However, Graham (2006) has also acknowledged that blended learning has some problems. For example, educators and students need sound technology and support. Overall, Graham's ideas help us understand how to use blended learning well and what problems we must solve for it to work.

Vaughan (2010) is another prominent expert in blended learning, significantly advancing understanding in this field. His research combines theoretical insights with practical applications, aiding educators and instructional designers in implementing compelling blended learning experiences. Vaughan (2010) emphasises the importance of creating meaningful learning experiences by leveraging the strengths of both in-person and online modalities. However, Vaughan's (2010) model has limitations, such as a lack of contextual flexibility for non-Western settings, assumptions about high technological proficiency, and insufficient attention to implementation challenges like faculty training and institutional support. These limitations suggest the need for adaptation to diverse educational environments. Implementing blended learning on a large scale can be challenging due to the need for significant institutional support,

including faculty training, technological investment, and curriculum redesign. Vaughan's models may not always account for these practical constraints.

Bonk and Graham (2012) have significantly influenced technology integration in education, shaping the effective use of digital tools, online courses, and innovative educational technologies. Their expertise emphasises the importance of blending technology-mediated learning with face-to-face interactions. They also believe a well-designed mix of online and in-person activities enhances the learning experience, offering flexibility and personalisation.

According to Bonk and Graham (2012), blended learning allows students more control over the pace and path of their knowledge, catering to diverse styles and preferences. The role of motivation and engagement in effective learning has been emphasised by Bonk and Graham (2012). They believe that well-designed blended learning experiences can help maintain students' interest and motivation, which is crucial for successful outcomes. My research sought to explore the benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction, and these insights from the above scholars can be verified. Effective learning requires students to be actively involved in developing their learning and a learning community that shares a common culture.

Picciano (2021) has significantly contributed to blended learning by developing a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates online and face-to-face components to optimise educational outcomes. He emphasises the importance of considering various educational approaches and tailoring blended learning environments to meet diverse needs. There is no single learning theory for face-to-face or online learning—his work includes the influential book *Theories and Frameworks for Online Education: Seeking an Integrated Model. A Guide to Administering Distance Learning* (2021) explores the theoretical foundations, pedagogical implications, and practical applications of blended learning, demonstrating how technology enhances learning. Picciano's (2021) framework incorporates multiple educational theories, such as the Community of Inquiry Framework, Connectivism, and Online Collaborative Learning. It stresses student-centred pedagogy, social interaction, and strategic use of technology to support diverse learning preferences.

## **2.4 Blended Learning and its Benefits in ESL Teaching and Learning**

The field of ESL teaching has gained increasing interest in using blended learning approaches, which combine online and offline activities to enhance learning outcomes, and many educational institutions follow the blended learning programme. Thus, with positive results, blended learning has been the focus of research in numerous countries. For example, Wang et al. (2021) found that blended learning improved English language proficiency for Chinese university students. Similarly, Li and Wang (2022) noted that blended learning improved the academic performance of Chinese students learning English. At the same time, Burrell and Lee (2020) found that blended learning improved Korean students' overall English proficiency. From these studies, we can conclude that blended learning can positively impact academic achievement.

Van Blerk (2019) studied blended learning at a tertiary institution, examining the impact of integrating online and face-to-face teaching on student engagement and performance. The study found that blended learning allows students to learn while managing their studies with other responsibilities. This study highlights the benefits of additional support material from online resources, which enhances the overall learning experience (Van Blerk, 2019). However, several challenges were identified. Some challenges include limited internet access, technical difficulties, and the lack of self-discipline among some students. This hindered some students' ability to fully engage with online components, causing frustration for students and educators and making it difficult for them to manage their time and stay abreast of their coursework. His study emphasised that while blended learning has great potential to improve education, ensuring all students have access to the necessary tools and resources is essential for its success.

In another study, Khattak et al. (2023) explored the effectiveness of blended learning in improving language proficiency, speaking skills, and confidence in English for adult students in Pakistan. Another study by Behzadpoor and Mansouri (2023) showed that blended learning improved language test scores and positively affected attitudes toward learning English among ESL students in Iran. These studies demonstrate the benefits of blended learning, including personalised learning experiences, increased opportunities for practise and feedback, and improved motivation and engagement. The commonality between their study and this research

is that both investigations involved individuals communicating in the same language. However, there is a distinction in terms of the locations. Universities have embraced this method, observing strong retention rates, which suggests that blended learning is likely to remain a crucial component of the ESL curriculum. Blended learning has also been examined in numerous other countries.

Universities have adopted the blended learning approach with high retention rates, indicating that blended learning will likely continue to be integral to ESL curriculum development. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, ESL universities use the blended learning teaching method (Al Lily et al., 2020). Xu and Li's (2023) investigation of blended learning in Chinese ESL classrooms and Ji et al. (2022) study of a blended learning course for Korean university students has also supported the effectiveness of blended learning in improving language proficiency and motivation. Therefore, the evidence suggests that blended learning is a valuable tool in enhancing ESL learning, allowing for online grammar and vocabulary exercises while using classroom time for conversation practice or reading comprehension activities.

## **2.5 Importance of Blended Learning in Promoting Academic Achievement**

Blended learning has gained traction due to the prevalence of technology among modern-day students. This learning mode enables educators to assess student knowledge more accurately and promote efficient teaching of various concepts. According to Yajie and Jumaat (2023), blended learning is increasingly important for educational institutions to transform the conventional classroom into a more open and innovative integration of teaching and learning not limited to time and space.

Evans et al. (2003) mention that students learn better when exposed to a flexible learning environment. Their study highlights that students show positive outcomes, including improved language proficiency, enhanced academic performance, and higher levels of student satisfaction. However, it is crucial to consider individual differences and preferences when implementing blended learning approaches. Blended learning has been extensively researched in books, journals, and papers, and scholars have studied the factors influencing students' willingness to accept blended learning and their learning participation, behaviour, and effect. However, insufficient research has been conducted on the inductive analysis of ESL teaching practices.

Hence, this study at Tabuk University focused on how blended learning helps students learn English as a second language.

Tayebinik and Puteh (2012) found that blended learning can be an efficient approach to distance learning in terms of students' learning experience, student-student interaction, and student-educator interaction and is likely to become the predominant education model in the future. Their study demonstrated positive outcomes, including improved language proficiency, enhanced academic performance, and higher levels of student satisfaction. However, the effectiveness of blended learning in ESL contexts may be influenced by various factors, including the programme's specific design, instruction quality, and student engagement level; thus, individual preferences and differences must be considered when implementing blended learning approaches. This research investigated effective strategies used in blended learning classes and how they enhance academic achievement among ESL university students.

## **2.6 The Impact of Blended Learning on Student Academic Achievement in ESL University Education**

The field of ESL teaching has gained increasing interest in using blended learning approaches, which combine online and offline activities to enhance learning outcomes. Universities have embraced this method, observing strong retention rates, which suggests that blended learning is likely to remain a crucial component of the ESL curriculum. According to McLaughlin et al. (2015), numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of applying blended learning to teaching, improving student academic achievement. McLaughlin et al. (2015) study on the effects of blended learning on student performance emphasised the importance of integrating online modules with classroom learning and incorporating active learning strategies to enhance academic performance.

Moreover, Tong et al. (2022) conducted studies that confirmed the positive influence of blended learning on students' academic achievement in the experimental class compared to the control class. Additionally, observations and student opinion survey results have indicated that blended learning increased student interactions with educators and improved academic achievement, self-study abilities, and learning attitudes. However, it is essential to note that not all students

who participated in the experiment progressed, and the study's small sample size represented only a portion of the population.

Several studies (Hwang and Lai, 2017; Xu and Li, 2023; Li & Wang, 2022) have examined the impact of blended learning on academic achievement for university students. For example, Hwang and Lai (2017) found that blended learning improved academic achievement for Korean university students. Xu and Li's (2023) investigation of blended learning in Chinese ESL classrooms and their study of a blended learning course for Korean university students have also supported the effectiveness of blended learning in improving language proficiency and motivation. Therefore, blended learning is a valuable tool in enhancing ESL learning, allowing for online grammar and vocabulary exercises while using classroom time for conversation practice or reading comprehension activities. In addition, Wang et al. (2021) have found that blended learning improved English language proficiency for Chinese university students. Similarly, Li and Wang's (2022) study demonstrated that blended learning improved the academic performance of Chinese students learning English. These findings suggest that blended learning can be a practical approach to teaching English as a second language.

Kintu et al. (2020) conducted a study in Uganda on innovative pedagogy that involved using a learning management system (Moodle) for the first time in teaching and learning at a Ugandan university. They suggest that design features (technology quality, online tools, and resources) and student characteristics (such as attitudes towards blended learning and self-regulation) are significant predictors of student satisfaction, knowledge construction, and intrinsic motivation in blended learning environments.

High-quality technology and positive student attitudes enhance satisfaction. The blended learning process can be significantly improved by delivering the content using visual media (video, audio, and graphics), an effective teaching and learning approach (Suhail et al., 2012). Self-regulation and social support from peers aid in knowledge construction, and sound technology and tools and high interaction levels boost intrinsic motivation. However, these factors do not predict learning outcomes (grades).

Blended learning is associated with higher levels of student satisfaction. Alqahtani and Al-Rahmi (2022) found that blended learning was associated with higher levels of student satisfaction among Saudi university students learning English. Similarly, Li and Wang (2022) found that blended learning was associated with higher levels of student satisfaction among Chinese university students learning English. These findings suggest that blended learning may be a more engaging and satisfying approach to learning than traditional face-to-face instruction.

Several studies (Burrell & Lee, 2020; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Kuo & Anderson, 2010; Li & Wang, 2022) have also highlighted that blended learning can improve students' attitudes toward learning by offering a more engaging and interactive approach than traditional classroom-based instruction. Increased engagement and interactivity can lead to higher motivation and persistence in language learning. However, the effectiveness of blended learning in promoting academic achievement among ESL university students may depend on a range of factors, such as programme design, instructional quality, and student engagement. It is crucial to consider individual learning preferences and needs when implementing blended learning in ESL programmes, as some students may still prefer traditional classroom-based instruction.

The existing literature suggests blended learning can positively impact academic achievement, English language proficiency, and student satisfaction in university settings. This highlights the value of utilising blended learning as a practical approach to teaching ESL. This study investigated how students' attitudes, satisfaction, convenience, engagement, and learning experiences in blended learning environments influence their academic achievements. Additionally, I explored whether blended learning enhances their critical thinking skills and overall competency. By addressing these research objectives, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature and fill the gap in understanding blended learning among ESL university students.

## **2.7 Blended Learning Strategies of ESL Educators in Higher Education**

Blended learning is an instructional approach that combines traditional face-to-face teaching with online learning components. It has gained significant traction in higher education, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) settings. This model provides flexibility and accessibility,

allowing students to engage with course materials at their own pace while benefiting from direct interactions with instructors and peers. According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008), blended learning fosters more profound learning experiences by promoting active student engagement and collaboration. ESL educators and lecturers increasingly adopt blended learning strategies to cater to diverse learner needs, facilitating differentiated instruction and enhancing language acquisition. This approach supports various learning styles and enables educators to incorporate a range of multimedia tools and resources that enrich the learning environment (Kintu et al., 2020).

However, the successful implementation of blended learning in ESL instruction requires teachers to develop effective instructional strategies that leverage in-person and online components. Research has shown that effective strategies include utilizing interactive online platforms, incorporating multimedia resources, and facilitating collaborative projects that promote communication skills (Van Blerk, 2019). Despite the potential benefits, ESL educators face challenges, like technological resources and varying levels of digital literacy among students, which can reduce the effectiveness of blended learning. To overcome these challenges, educators must receive adequate training and support in integrating technology into their teaching practices. By addressing these issues, ESL educators can create a more inclusive and practical blended learning experience that enhances language proficiency and engagement among students (Vaughan, 2010).

## **2.8 Blended Learning Instructional Models and Approaches**

Blended learning instructional models and approaches combine traditional face-to-face teaching with online learning to create a more flexible and engaging educational experience. Various models, such as the Rotation Model, Flex Model, and Enriched Virtual Model, offer distinct frameworks for integrating in-person and digital instruction.

The Rotation Model allows students to alternate between different learning modalities, such as attending physical classes and completing online activities, while the Flex Model provides a more personalized approach where online resources are the primary mode of instruction, with face-to-

face support as needed. The Enriched Virtual Model, on the other hand, emphasizes online learning while incorporating periodic in-person sessions. These models not only enhance student engagement but also accommodate diverse learning preferences, allowing educators to tailor their teaching strategies to meet the varied needs of learners. Effective implementation of blended learning models requires careful consideration of technology, instructional design, and ongoing assessment to ensure that students achieve their learning objectives.

Blended learning instructional approaches integrate traditional classroom methods with online learning, creating a dynamic educational environment that caters to diverse learning preferences. One commonly used approach is the Flipped Classroom, where students engage with instructional content online at their own pace and then participate in interactive, hands-on activities during face-to-face class time. This method allows educators to focus on deeper learning and application of knowledge rather than merely delivering information. This approach is used at Tabuk University. Another practical approach is the Station Rotation model. This approach involves students rotating between different learning stations, online and in-person. This allows for varied instructional strategies and personalized learning experiences. The Personal Learning Environment (PLE) approach empowers students to take charge of their learning by selecting resources and tools that best suit their needs and interests. Educators can use these instructional approaches to enhance student engagement, foster collaboration, and improve overall learning outcomes in blended learning contexts.

## **2.9 Challenges of Blended Learning in Higher Education**

Blended learning in higher education offers unique opportunities for enhancing the learning experience but also presents several challenges that institutions must address. One of the primary obstacles is the technological barrier, which includes inadequate infrastructure, unreliable internet access, and outdated hardware. These issues can impede the seamless integration of online components, leading to frustration among educators and students (Kintu et al., 2020). Additionally, varying levels of digital literacy among educators and students create discrepancies in effectively utilizing digital tools, impacting the quality of the learning experience. As educators attempt to integrate new technologies into their teaching practices, they may encounter resistance

due to a lack of training or familiarity with these tools, resulting in inconsistent implementation of blended learning models.

Cultural factors further complicate the adoption of blended learning in higher education. For instance, some students may feel uncomfortable using technology in educational settings or resist new teaching methods that deviate from traditional approaches (Graham, 2006). Moreover, differing socio-economic backgrounds can influence students' access to technology and resources, creating inequities in learning opportunities. These challenges highlight the need for tailored solutions that consider the diverse contexts of higher education institutions. By addressing these obstacles through targeted professional development, improved infrastructure, and ongoing support, educational institutions can create a more inclusive and effective blended learning environment that benefits all learners.

## **2.10 Chapter Summary**

The literature review examined blended learning, an educational approach that combined online and face-to-face instructional methods. It also investigated the effects on student academic achievement in ESL education at Tabuk University. It discussed the historical context and benefits such as personalised instruction, increased practice opportunities, and enhanced student attitudes. Research findings from various countries demonstrated that blended learning positively influences ESL students' language proficiency and academic performance. However, the review also identified challenges, including limited internet access, technical issues, and the need for self-discipline. Flexibility in blended learning allows students to interact with materials at their own pace, emphasising the importance of adequate institutional support and instructional design. Overall, this chapter synthesised existing literature, identified research gaps, and paved the way for additional investigation of blended learning's effectiveness in ESL contexts, mainly focusing on the experiences of female ESL undergraduate students at Tabuk University. The review reinforced the positive impact of blended learning in ESL education through various sources.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter looked at different viewpoints about blended learning. It delved into the origin of blended learning and why it is suitable for teaching English to students who speak another language. It also attempted to explain how blended learning assists students in academic achievement in university. Thoughts and ideas from authors who have written about blended learning were examined.

This chapter will discuss the COI framework used to structure and guide the study. The theoretical framework also informed the data generation techniques, analysis methods, and interpretation of findings. A theoretical framework reviews existing theories to help guide arguments. It includes broad concepts or principles to direct research. A theoretical framework is a “logically developed and connected set of concepts and premises—developed from one or more theories” (Varpio et al., 2020, p. 989). I will first present the theory's history, define it, argue why this theory is relevant to the study, and discuss some of the critiques.

#### **3.2 Community of Inquiry as the Theoretical Framework for this Study**

As mentioned above, the COI framework was used to guide the development of my research. The COI framework played a significant role in this study as it provided a structured approach to understanding the dynamics of blended learning environments, particularly in the context of ESL. The focus on the three critical presences (social, cognitive, and teaching), Garrison et al. (2010) emphasised the importance of interaction among participants to enhance the learning experience. This framework facilitated an exploration of how ESL students and educators engage in the blended learning context, revealing insights into how social interactions can promote a sense of community and belonging (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, 2010).

This COI framework has been widely used in education to guide educational experiences, focusing primarily on blended learning (Graham, 2018). Graham's research has helped educators design and facilitate effective online and blended learning by focusing on essential elements. His work has dramatically impacted the field and continues to influence best practices. Accordingly, he has also improved instructional design and teaching practices, emphasising social presence to create engaging and interactive online learning environments (Graham, 2018). Thus, Graham's work on the COI framework and research in online and blended learning has been instrumental in advancing the field. His contributions have provided educators and researchers with valuable tools to enhance the quality of online education. However, it should be considered within the broader context of evolving educational practices and technologies, and its limitations should be acknowledged when applying it to specific situations.

Furthermore, the COI framework guided the analysis of how educators can effectively design and implement blended learning experiences that foster critical thinking and collaboration among students (Vaughan, 2010). This study utilised the COI framework to assess the effectiveness of blended learning practices at Tabuk University. This allowed for the evaluation of the interplay between technology and pedagogical strategies supporting language acquisition.

Using the COI framework, the research aimed to illuminate how blended learning can enhance ESL students' learning outcomes while addressing the challenges they face in adapting to new educational environments (Kuo & Anderson, 2010; Li & Wang, 2022). This comprehensive approach not only reinforced the relevance of the COI framework in contemporary educational research but also provided a theoretical foundation for improving the implementation of blended learning strategies in higher education contexts.

In this study, the COI framework operated as a core theoretical viewpoint to explore the experiences of ESL educators and students in blended learning environments. The COI framework emphasizes three critical presences: cognitive, social, and teaching, facilitating meaningful learning experiences. Applying this framework, the research examined how these presences were demonstrated in the context of ESL instruction at Tabuk University. The cognitive presence reflects the ESL student's ability to construct meaning through sustained communication and critical thinking. In contrast, social presence emphasizes the importance of interpersonal

relationships and community building among learners. Teaching presence encompasses designing, facilitating, and directing cognitive and social processes to achieve educational outcomes. This comprehensive approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of the interactions between these elements, providing insights into how they collectively influence student engagement and learning outcomes in blended learning settings.

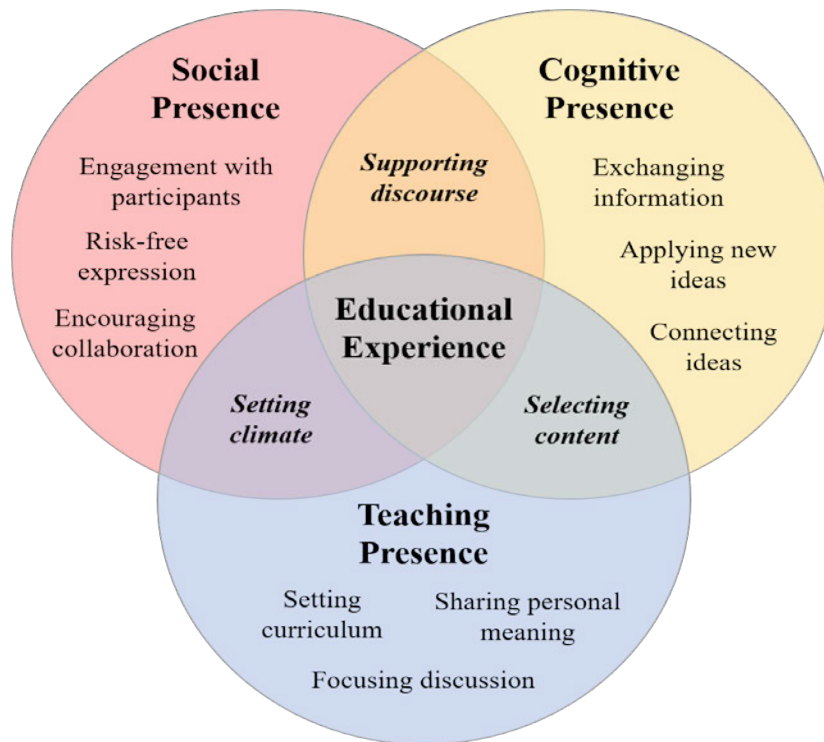
Additionally, the COI framework helped identify the specific challenges and opportunities ESL educators and students face in integrating blended learning practices. The study explored how educators facilitated discussions, provided feedback, and created a supportive learning environment by focusing on how teaching presence can enhance cognitive and social interactions. This focus enabled the identification of key strategies that promote effective blended learning, such as using collaborative tools and fostering open communication. Furthermore, the framework highlighted areas where support and resources are needed to strengthen the presence of each component. By leveraging the COI framework, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of blended learning in ESL education, stressing the interdependence of cognitive, social, and teaching presences and their impact on overall educational experiences.

### **3.3 The Three Key Concepts of COI**

The COI framework posits that successful online learning environments require social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Garrison, 2009; Garrison et al., 2010; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Graham, 2018).

#### **Figure 1**

*Community of Inquiry*



Garrison et al. (1999). 87–105

### 3.3.1 Social Presence

Social presence refers to the ability of students to engage with each other in a supportive and collaborative learning community (McKerlich et al., 2011). Students must share their emotions and ideas with peers and educators, actively communicating verbally and non-verbally. There is open communication between the students and educators, and they do not inhibit their ideas and emotions. There is also a sense of collaboration within the group. Students and educators feel comfortable respectfully disagreeing with each other or the educator. All members acknowledge others' points of view.

### 3.3.2 Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence is an essential element of COI. It includes constructing meaning through reflection, discourse, critical thinking, and the students' cognitive development (Garrison et al.,

2010). The students should be able to use their minds when learning online. The four stages of critical inquiry in cognitive presence are triggering events, exploration, integration and resolution. (Van Blerk, 2019).

Triggering events describe instructional problems that increase participants' interest and course activities that stimulate curiosity and motivation to explore content-related questions (Van Blerk, 2019). This is crucial in developing critical thinking among students in blended learning. Exploration involves exploring problems through various information sources and appreciating other students' ideas and perspectives during discussion (Van Blerk, 2019). Integration combines information to address questions using learning activities to explain, reflect, and understand fundamental concepts (Van Blerk, 2019). Van Blerk (2019) argues that resolution describes ways to apply knowledge, develop solutions to problems, and use the knowledge beyond the course. Thus, the four stages in cognitive integration aim to create a mental connection between different types of knowledge, emphasising integrating procedural and conceptual understanding.

### *3.3.3 Teaching Presence*

According to Garrison et al. (2010), teaching presence is related to facilitation management, design and organisation, and direct instruction. Facilitation management is how the educator helps students learn and understand course topics to clarify thinking. The educators engage the students in a dialogue, keeping them on task, encouraging them to explore new concepts, and developing a sense of community among the participants. Teaching presence involves the educator's design and organisation. This is how the educator communicates course topics and goals, instructs students in course learning activities, and communicates due dates and time limits for learning activities. Direct instruction is when the educator guides a discussion on relevant issues, providing feedback to students based on their strengths and weaknesses in the course and giving timely feedback. The educators are responsible for instructing students in online and classroom learning. The COI theory was relevant to my research study as it provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors contributing to successful blended learning environments.

In addition, Garrison et al. (2010) maintain that each of these three presences (social, cognitive and teaching) comprises the design and student experience. The cognitive presence, the design element, involves proposing solutions and questioning or challenging problem exploration. In contrast, the student experience includes sharing and connecting ideas, applying new concepts, and dealing with complex information. The design elements for social presence encompass collaboration and communication clusters, while the student experience involves expressing views that encourage collaboration and appreciating learning opportunities.

Lastly, the design element for teaching presence includes motivating students, building understanding, and providing instructor guidance. In contrast, the student experience involves focusing on the content, engaging in discussions, sharing personal meanings, and initiating talks (Garrison et al., 2010). Therefore, the COI framework and its three elements are employed in this study as they are well-suited for researching blended learning in higher education, particularly for teaching ESL at Tabuk University.

The three COI concepts, social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence helped me understand and analyse blended learning. Using the COI framework, I examined how these three concepts work together to make ESL teaching more effective. Social presence examines how students and educators build a sense of community and work together, essential for language learning. Cognitive presence helped me see how students learn and use knowledge online and in person. Teaching presence lets me evaluate how courses are designed, taught, and guided. This framework guided the study and enabled me to investigate the complex aspects of blended learning at Tabuk University.

Building on Garrison et al. (2010) foundational work on social, teaching, and cognitive presence, Van Blerk (2019) presented an additional perspective that further enriches our understanding of COI. Van Blerk (2019) presented categories and indicators within the three elements of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Table 1 is the representation of this assertion.

**Table 1***Community of Inquiry Categories and Indicators*

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
Social presence	Open communication group Cohesion affective/personal	Enabling risk-free expression Encouraging collaboration Expressing emotions, camaraderie
Cognitive presence	Triggering event Exploration integration	Having a sense of puzzlement Exchanging information Connecting ideas
Teaching presence	Resolution Design and organisation Facilitation of discourse Direct instruction	Applying new ideas Setting curriculum and methods Sharing personal meaning Focusing discussion

Van Blerk’s categories and indicators offer a detailed, practical framework that complements and operationalises the theoretical constructs of Garrison’s COI model. They provide educators and researchers with specific behaviours and interactions to observe and measure, thereby enhancing the understanding and application of the COI framework in blended and online learning environments.

I incorporated Van Blerk’s (2019) categories and indicators in my data generation and analysis structure and used them to support my conclusion. Incorporating these categories has enhanced my study's depth and clarity by providing a detailed lens through which to view the interactions and processes within blended learning environments. This approach aligns with the COI framework and offers specific, actionable insights critical for understanding and improving blended learning in ESL education.

### **3.4 Application of Blended Learning and COI**

The COI framework is widely used in online and blended education. It emphasises the interaction of social, teaching, and cognitive presences, focusing on social presence becoming more crucial in today's learning environments. Social presence has evolved and is now recognised as a critical driver of engagement, peer support, and sense-making in online and blended learning. As such,

Armellini and de Stefani's (2016) study proposes an updated COI framework representation, highlighting social presence's central role in higher-order thinking. The proposed update has implications for course design and delivery in online and blended settings, emphasising the importance of fostering social presence to facilitate meaningful teaching and cognitive discourse. However, merely promoting social presence does not guarantee improved cognition in online learning (Armellini & de Stefani, 2016).

Numerous research investigations have utilised the COI framework within educational settings and blended learning (Zulu, 2022; ElSayad, 2023). Recent research conducted by ElSayad (2023) at a higher education institution in Egypt investigated the relationships among teaching presence, social presence, cognitive presence, learning presence, and perceived learning in the context of blended learning courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article offers valuable insights into online and blended learning education dynamics. They emphasise the importance of educators in promoting a sense of community and interaction among students. However, they argue that teaching presence has a minimal impact on cognitive presence.

ElSayad's findings also reveal that social presence has significant positive effects on learning and cognitive presence, emphasising the importance of group activities, discussions, and peer interactions in blended learning environments. The results indicate that teaching presence has a noteworthy and positive impact on social and learning presence (ElSayad, 2023). These findings are similar to prior research conducted by Shea and Bidjerano (2012) and Yu et al. (2023). These findings suggest that while social presence contributes to cognitive engagement, students' perceptions of their learning outcomes may be influenced by the quality of the instructional materials or prior knowledge. The study further emphasises that educators are critical in delivering successful blended learning experiences (ElSayad, 2023).

ElSayad's (2023) research offers valuable insights into the intricate relationships among teaching presence, social presence, cognitive presence, learning presence, and perceived learning in blended learning courses within higher education. My research similarly examined the impact of educators' presence in learning ESL at the University of Tabuk. ElSayad's study was conducted in Egypt, where the native language is Arabic, although English is also commonly spoken in Egypt. However, it is unknown if the language proficiency of the research subjects were native English speakers or if they were ESL students. My research subjects were Arabic speakers, and their second language was English.

In a separate study, Yajie and Jumaat (2023) conducted their research on the design of a blended learning approach for an English language course in higher education at a university in North-eastern Taiwan, using the COI framework as their foundation to assess perceived effectiveness and enhanced performance. The findings indicate a statistically significant correlation between the three dimensions of a community of inquiry, perceived learning, and learning engagement. Moreover, teaching and cognitive presence are more predictive of students' perceived learning (Yajie & Jumaat, 2023). While Mandarin Chinese is Taiwan's official language, their article did not specify whether the subjects' home language was English or ESL. However, it was noted that they were enrolled for an English language course. The focus of their study contrasts with my research, where the participants were individuals from a native Arabic-speaking country learning ESL. Similarly, their study and mine involved first-year undergraduate university students as participants.

Yajie and Jumaat's (2023) quantitative research used offline and online tasks to examine how deliberate practice influences performance. However, my thesis was based on qualitative methods and the implementation of blended teaching and learning strategies among first-year students enrolled in English as their second language at Tabuk University, Saudi Arabia. The qualitative method was more suited for my study because it aimed to understand individuals' social reality, including their attitudes, beliefs, and motivation toward blended learning. Yajie and Jumaat (2023) emphasise the importance of educators in promoting a sense of community and interaction among students. However, they argue that teaching presence has a minimal impact on cognitive presence, which does not agree with my study, which found that teaching presence impacts cognitive presence.

The results of Zhang's (2020) study indicate that the teaching, social, and cognitive presences are correlated, and that social and cognitive presences have a high correlation. Furthermore, students' motivation towards learning specialised English was activated in the blended learning process. Van der Stap et al. (2024) state that social presence in blended learning is created through good course design, face-to-face meetings, group activities, quick online feedback, educator involvement, and careful planning. The basic theory should be available online via videos, lectures, and articles, followed by simple online assignments or self-study to enhance learning. The above aims to prepare students for deeper learning through discussions and group activities during face-to-face sessions.

Swan and Shih (2005) examined how people connect in online classes. They researched the frequency and method of communication. While they did not directly criticise how social presence is seen in the COI framework, their study showed how it works online. They found that social presence is influenced by how people talk and how much they participate. Their study helped me understand social presence better in online classes.

The studies above demonstrate that the COI framework has been widely applied in blended learning contexts, highlighting its relevance to this research.

### **3.5 Critiques of COI**

According to Graham (2006), the COI framework considerably influences cognitive, social, and teaching presences in online learning environments. However, it has been criticised for not fully including the complex and diverse aspects of online and blended learning. Graham's (2018) research does not address the challenges associated with technology integration, accessibility, and the diversity of students. Graham's research does not include challenges linked to technology integration, accessibility, and the diversity of students. While Graham (2018) has laid a foundational understanding of blended learning, his work overlooks some practical challenges educators face in real-world applications. The current study aimed to fill this literature gap by examining how educators and students at Tabuk University engage in blended learning environments for teaching and learning ESL. This research explored technology integration, evaluated the accessibility of blended learning resources for all students, and analysed how

blended learning approaches cater to a diverse student population with varied learning needs and preferences.

Many sources support social presence's positive impact on teaching and learning presence learning (Zulu, 2022; ElSayad, 2023; Yajie and Jumaat, 2023). However, Rourke and Kanuka (2009) critique social presence within the COI framework. They argue that social presence might be overemphasised, and its definition and measurement are too broad and vague, making it hard to determine its actual impact on learning outcomes. They also suggest that focusing too much on social presence might take attention away from more critical cognitive and teaching aspects, causing an imbalance in designing and evaluating online and blended learning environments.

Xin (2012), in his paper, criticises the COI framework, which is widely used for studying text-based asynchronous online discussion. He argues that the educator often records asynchronous lessons, and students access course materials, lectures, and assignments at their convenience. These lessons are said to be more flexible as they allow students to work at their own pace from any location. These lessons are available on online platforms like Zoom or in a physical classroom, allowing the educator and the student to interact in a real conversation. Xin's paper argues that COI does not consider the complex multi-functionality of communicative acts, which often combine instruction, knowledge construction, and social interaction. It clarifies the confused relation of cause and effect in the COI framework. The paper specifies the leadership functions of teaching presence and how they are intertwined with social and cognitive functions. Xin (2012) argues that social presence goes beyond a mere aspect or component of online discussion; it is the backdrop of everything. Despite their apparent intention, all online utterances are inherently social (Xin, 2012). Intellectual engagement is unstructured and contrasts with the four-stage cognitive development the COI framework assumes.

In conclusion, the above scholars differ in their research focus, empirical results, and primary emphasis. ElSayad (2023) concentrates on social and teaching presence within blended learning, Yajie and Jumaat (2023) emphasise the COI model and the predictive value of teaching and cognitive presence, whereas Xin (2012) critically evaluates the COI framework and highlights the significance of social presence in online discussions. All three authors recognise the importance of social presence in online learning environments. ElSayad's (2023) and Xin's

(2012) works touch upon teaching presence, although they have different perspectives. ElSayad (2023) highlights the positive impact of teaching presence on social and learning presence. At the same time, Xin critiques the COI framework for treating teaching presence and its relationship with social and cognitive functions.

### **3.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an in-depth examination of the importance of the COI theory when studying blended learning. Since blended learning continually changes, educators and policymakers must recognise its significance, ensuring students receive a comprehensive education in the ever-changing 21st century. The history of the theoretical framework, its use in other studies, and its critique were discussed. Chapter 4 explores this study's research design, methods, and data generation techniques.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Methodology**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter reviewed the literature on blended learning and its impact on teaching ESL from sources such as books, journals, and scholarly works. It provided an in-depth examination of the importance of the COI theory when studying blended learning. This methodology chapter is a roadmap for analysing and interpreting data to derive meaningful insights from this research. It sheds light on the research design, rigour, techniques, research paradigm, population, data generation, sampling, and data analysis strategies. Thus, it enables the reader to grasp the rigour and validity of the study's findings. The chapter concludes by detailing how ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness are addressed in this study.

#### **4.2 Research Paradigm**

The study is firmly situated within the interpretivism paradigm. According to Bryman (2016), the interpretivism paradigm is essential for exploring individuals' subjective experiences, beliefs, and perceptions in the educational process. Interpretivism is predicated upon the view that a strategy that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action (Scotland, 2012). Interpretivism emphasises understanding people's meanings and interpretations of their social world. It is particularly relevant for research in educational settings focusing on how students and educators perceive, and experience blended learning environments.

The interpretivist paradigm also aligns with the study's theoretical framework, the Community of Inquiry. The COI framework emphasises the importance of social, cognitive, and teaching presences in creating meaningful learning experiences in blended learning environments (Garrison et al., 2000). The interactions and relationships among these elements support the interpretivist view that learning is a socially constructed process. The study uses the COI framework to analyse how blended learning facilitates or hinders these presences, providing insights into the participants' views and experiences.

Moreover, the interpretivist paradigm's focus on context and meaning-making is crucial for understanding the challenges and benefits of blended learning in a specific cultural and institutional setting, such as Tabuk University. The study acknowledges that the effectiveness of blended learning is not universal but is influenced by the unique characteristics of the students, educators, and the educational context. Recognising context-specific factors is a core tenet of interpretivism, which seeks understanding phenomena within their natural settings.

#### *4.2.1 Ontological Assumptions of the Interpretivist Paradigm*

Ontologically, interpretivism posits that reality is socially constructed and subjective. This perspective aligns with the study's focus on understanding how ESL educators and students at Tabuk University perceive and experience blended learning. Unlike positivist paradigms that seek objective truths, interpretivism acknowledges that multiple realities exist based on individuals' interactions and experiences (Bryman, 2016). Guba and Lincoln (1994) added that an accurate understanding of "how things are" and "how things work" is best obtained from individuals with first-hand experience of the phenomenon (p. 108). This study recognises that the educators' and students' perceptions of blended learning are shaped by their personal, cultural, and contextual factors, thereby embracing a relativist ontology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

#### *4.2.2 Epistemological Assumptions of the Interpretivism Paradigm*

Epistemologically, interpretivism asserts that knowledge is co-constructed through researcher and participant interactions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This epistemological stance is evident in the study's methodological approach, which employs qualitative methods such as face-to-face interviews, classroom observations, and focus groups. These methods facilitate deep engagement with participants, allowing for the co-construction of meaning and understanding. The researcher's background in educational technology and ESL instruction further influences this co-construction process, as the researcher's insights and experiences shape the interpretation of data (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

In this study, my ontological and epistemological opinions have been significantly influenced by my past experiences. My epistemological and ontological positions have evolved from my background and training as an ESL educator, particularly within higher education. This professional journey has influenced my ontological and epistemological assumptions in social research. These beliefs, in turn, guide my understanding and rationale concerning the research methods, methodology, and overall approach to social research.

Reflecting on my experiences as a student and educator in South Africa and Saudi Arabia has led me to develop a more nuanced view of learning and teaching strategies. This perspective is informed by various philosophical discourses, which emphasise the importance of context, diversity, and multiple realities in educational research. My ontological and epistemological stance has been crucial in shaping the study's methodological approach, ensuring it captures the rich, complex realities of blended learning in ESL education at Tabuk University.

The study's location within the interpretivism paradigm is evident through its ontological and epistemological assumptions. The qualitative methods are designed to capture participants' rich, detailed narratives, providing a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. This approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm and ensures that the study captures the rich, complex realities of blended learning in higher education.

### **4.3 Research Approach**

The research approach employed in this study was qualitative. Pathak et al. (2013) describe qualitative research as the broader methodology to understand human experiences, actions, and interactions with their surroundings. It involves gathering rich, descriptive data to gain insights into individuals' subjective experiences and perspectives (Bryman, 2016). The study was located within the interpretive paradigm and focused on understanding human experiences and meanings. Reality is subjective, and the data is generated naturally. This paradigm helped explore how blended learning is experienced and perceived by ESL students and educators. The qualitative case study design allowed for a detailed examination of the specific context of Tabuk

University and provided rich insights into the phenomenon of interest. It helped uncover the complexities and dynamics of blended learning practices in the ESL instruction setting.

#### **4.4 Research Design**

The case study research design was selected for this study due to its ability to explore the complexities surrounding blended learning in ESL education at Tabuk University. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) highlighted, case studies are particularly valuable for exploring complex educational phenomena, as they provide insights into the meanings and interpretations individuals assign to their experiences. According to Yin (2018), case studies allow researchers to investigate contemporary phenomena within their real-life context, mainly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear. This characteristic makes the case study approach particularly suitable for examining how ESL educators and students experience blended learning, as it enables a comprehensive understanding of the interactions, challenges, and successes inherent in this educational setting. Examining these interactions, challenges and successes in academic settings, this study aims to uncover the nuances of blended learning implementation and its impact on language learning outcomes, thus contributing to the growing body of literature on effective instructional practices in higher education (Stake, 2008).

Additionally, using a case study design facilitates the collection of rich qualitative data through various techniques such as face-to-face interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions. These data generation techniques align well with the interpretivist paradigm of this research, as they allow for capturing the perspectives and experiences of both educators and students (Creswell, 2014). This multi-faceted approach not only enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings but also enables me to explore the interconnected factors influencing the usefulness of blended learning. This research seeks to illuminate the implications of blended learning in ESL contexts and offer practical recommendations for enhancing teaching and learning practices.

#### **4.5 Data Generation Techniques**

In alignment with the interpretivist paradigm adopted for this study, data generation techniques emphasise capturing rich, contextual insights that explore participants' subjective experiences and

perceptions. Qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations were employed to delve deeply into the lived experiences and perspectives of ESL educators and students at Tabuk University. As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative methods within an interpretivist framework enable researchers to uncover nuanced meanings, interpretations, and understandings that contribute to constructing knowledge grounded in the participants' realities. Therefore, the choice of data generation techniques in this study not only aligns with the interpretivist paradigm's ontological and epistemological assumptions but also aims to provide comprehensive insights into the implementation and impact of blended learning in ESL education. I employed three data generation techniques in this study: observation, face-to-face interviews, and focus groups. Using the various methods to generate data from different participants allowed me to triangulate the data collected to ensure the study's trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

#### *4.5.1 Observations*

The data generation started with observation. Observation allows immediate feedback and does not require extensive technical skills (Kumar & Haque, 2021). I observed five lessons and took detailed notes to gather data on the observable behaviour of students and educators, focusing on aspects of content and assessment within the classroom. Observing the participants in their natural setting, the classroom and one online class, I aimed to gain a first-hand understanding of their behaviour and uncover deeper meanings in the data generation process. I used the observation schedule with different components informed by the theoretical framework chosen for the study, that is, social presence, cognitive presence, teaching presence, and community (see Appendix 1).

#### *4.5.2 Face-to-face Interviews*

Face-to-face interviews followed the observations. Interviews, as described by Easwaramoorthy and Zarinpoush (2006), involve a conversation between an interviewer and an interviewee to gather information. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the five educators. I used preplanned, open-ended questions to collect data on the participants' perspectives regarding

incorporating blended learning for teaching university students learning ESL (see Appendix 2). I observed the participants' verbal, non-verbal, and emotional responses throughout the interviews, creating a relaxed environment for them to freely express their thoughts and experiences. This approach provided valuable insights into how educators respond to blended learning, allowing me to capture their feelings, motivations, and meanings in their own words.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews are a qualitative research method combining structured and unstructured interview formats. In this approach, a set of open-ended questions to guide the conversation was planned. Still, the conversation allowed for flexibility in exploring additional topics and responses that arose during the interview. This method was beneficial for gaining in-depth insights into participants' perspectives, experiences, and feelings while maintaining consistency across interviews (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

The face-to-face aspect of this interview enhanced rapport between the participants and me, leading to more honest and detailed responses. This setting allowed me to observe non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, which provided additional context to the verbal responses. Thus, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were instrumental in exploratory research, where I sought to understand complex phenomena from the participant's viewpoint.

#### *4.5.3 Focus Group Discussion*

Lastly, I used focus group discussions for the students. As Jarvis and Barberena (2008) suggested, focus group discussions facilitate open communication among participants and rely on their dynamic interaction to generate data that may be difficult to obtain through one-on-one interviews. I created five focus groups of five students per group. This method was beneficial for collecting trustworthy and reliable information about student interactions, using pre-determined questions to guide the discussion (see Appendix 3). However, it is essential to acknowledge that analysing focus group data can be time-consuming, and some participants were hesitant to speak in English due to a lack of confidence. Therefore, limiting each focus group to only five participants created a comfortable environment that encouraged participants to share their thoughts freely and fostered active participation and engagement.

Overall, these data generation techniques provided comprehensive insights into the beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of educators and students regarding blended learning in the context of ESL instruction. All generated data were carefully recorded, documented, and managed for analysis.

#### **4.6 Research Site**

The setting for this research was Tabuk University, a public university in the northwest region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a country the Royal family ruled. Tabuk University offers a range of undergraduate and graduate programmes across multiple disciplines, including engineering, computer science, business administration, law, education, and health sciences. I conducted research at the Applied Educational College, which is situated in Al Maseef, with a student population of approximately 30,000.

#### **4.7 Population and Sampling Strategies**

The study population consisted of ESL students and educators from the Applied Educational faculty at Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia. This study used a combination of purposive and random sampling strategies. Patton (2007) defines purposeful sampling as a technique in which participants are deliberately selected based on specific criteria or characteristics that align with the research objectives. Random sampling, typically associated with quantitative research, was used in my thesis to ensure that the selection of 25 students provided an unbiased and representative sample of the broader student population. This method allowed for the generalisation of findings by minimising selection bias and ensuring that each student had an equal chance of being chosen. Educators were invited via email, and only 5 (five) were purposely selected based on the criterion that they had been using blended learning for ESL the longest. Table 2 shows the demographical information of the five educators. This approach contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the impact of blended learning on ESL teaching practices at Tabuk University.

**Table 2***Biographical Information of the Five Educators*

<b>Educator Participant's Pseudonym</b>	<b>Nationality and Age group</b>	<b>Educational Qualification</b>	<b>Teaching experience</b>
Liz Marshall	American 40-50	Bachelor of Law (LLB), TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)	America, China, and Saudi Arabia 2008 to date
Katie Austin	American 20-29	Bachelor of Education	America and Saudi Arabia 2017 to date
Sandra Jamison	British 50-59	Bachelor of Social Science, CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults)	Central Africa, England, Spain and Saudi Arabia 1999 to date
Ruby Robinson	South African 40-49	MBA (Master of Business Administration), CELTA	South Africa and Saudi Arabia 2011 to date
Sarah Smith	South African 20-29	Bachelor of Education TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and CELTA	South Africa, China, and Saudi 2015 to date

Students were randomly selected. The student sample size was 25, which was five (5) per class. Once the educators were selected, five (5) students from those five educators' classes were randomly selected for the research. This process allowed for diverse perspectives and experiences. Random sampling is a method of selecting study participants so that each individual has an equal chance of being chosen, which helps minimise bias and ensure the sample's representativeness (Morse, 1998).

#### **4.8 Methods of Data Analysis**

I used an inductive approach to data analysis. Bryman (2016) describes inductive analysis as an approach where "theories and concepts are developed from the data rather than being imposed on them at the outset" (p. 374). An inductive approach was used to analyse the qualitative data gathered from observations, interviews, and focus groups. The study followed the thematic analysis framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was chosen for its flexibility and depth, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the experiences and perceptions

of participants regarding blended learning in ESL education. The analysis followed the six critical steps proposed by Braun and Clarke, detailed as follows:

#### *4.8.1 Familiarisation with the Data*

The initial step involved immersing myself in the data collected from interviews, focus groups, and observations. This process required reading and re-reading transcripts and notes to comprehensively understand the content and context. Familiarisation enabled me to identify preliminary ideas and themes related to blended learning.

#### *4.8.2 Generating Initial Codes*

In this step, I systematically coded the data by identifying segments of text that related to specific aspects of blended learning experiences. I created codes that captured significant features of the data, allowing me to break down the information into manageable parts. This process was inductive, focusing on the content provided by participants without preconceived categories. Once the transcripts were finalised, they were shared with educators for accuracy.

#### *4.8.3 Searching for Themes*

After generating initial codes, I began to organise these codes into potential themes. This involved clustering related codes and identifying broader patterns from the data. For instance, codes related to student engagement, accessibility, and technological support were grouped under overarching themes that illustrated how ESL students and educators perceived blended learning.

#### *4.8.4 Reviewing Themes*

Once potential themes were identified, I reviewed them to ensure they accurately represented the data. This analysis involved checking the themes against the coded data and the entire dataset to confirm that they captured the essence of the participants' experiences. Themes that did not fit

well were refined or discarded, leading to a more coherent set of themes that reflected the findings. The process resulted in the five (5) themes per Table 5 in Chapter 5.

#### *4.8.5 Defining and Naming Themes*

In this step, I clearly defined each theme, articulating what each theme represented and how it contributed to understanding the overall research question. I developed concise names for each theme to ensure clarity and facilitate communication of more straightforward findings. This process also considered how themes interrelated and contributed to the broader narrative of blended learning in ESL contexts. Five themes were identified and are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

#### *4.8.6 Producing the Report*

Finally, the analysis culminated in producing a detailed report that presented the findings in a structured manner. The report included rich descriptions of each theme, supported by direct quotes from participants to illustrate their experiences and perspectives. This narrative highlighted and connected the findings to the research objectives, drawing on existing literature to contextualise the results within the broader blended learning and ESL education field. The report is presented in Chapter 6.

In following these steps, I ensured a rigorous and systematic approach to data analysis that enhanced the reliability and validity of the findings, providing valuable insights into the implications of blended learning for ESL education at Tabuk University.

### **4.9 Ethical Considerations**

According to Ngozwana (2018), ethics in research often address morally good or wrong behaviour. The first step was to get permission from Tabuk University to conduct the research involving both educators and students, ensuring that no harm would be caused to the institution or participants throughout the study (see Appendix 6). I then applied and received ethical

approval from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Ethics Committee to perform this study (see Appendix 4).

Then, all the participants, 5 (five) educators and 25 students, were given the consent form (see Appendix 5). As all the participants students were adults aged (above 18 years), consent was obtained directly from them, with written permission sought to record interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. Participant rights were prioritised, with clear explanations about their right to withdraw from the study without stating reasons or facing any negative consequences. A comprehensive consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and rights was prepared and signed by all participants. All educators and students were informed about the research, and equal opportunities were provided for participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, with participants' names not used in the final publication and data treated as confidential and accessible only to the supervisor. Cohen & Crabtree (2006) argue that explaining the research's benefits and getting informed consent early on is critical.

Cultural norms and values were respected, and efforts were made to ensure a safe and comfortable research environment, mainly since the participants were females. These measures ensured that the research involving female ESL students and educators at Tabuk University adhered to ethical standards. I also informed the participants that the data they supplied would only be utilised for this study and that all tapes would be kept for five years in a secure area that would only be accessible by my supervisor and me.

#### **4.10 Reflexivity**

In conducting this study, I had to reflect on my positionality as a researcher, potential biases, and the influence these factors may have had on the study's findings and interpretations. Reflexivity is critical in ensuring the research process remains transparent, rigorous, and ethically sound (Reid et al., 2018, p. 69).

##### *4.10.1 Researcher's Background and Positionality*

As the principal investigator, my previous experience as an ESL educator provided valuable insights into the practical challenges and benefits of blended learning. However, this also means that my preconceptions and personal experiences could have shaped the research focus and interpretation of data. For instance, my familiarity with technological tools and positive experiences with blended learning might have predisposed me to view its benefits more favourably (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). To mitigate potential biases, I employed several strategies throughout the research process. First, methodological triangulation was used by incorporating various data sources, such as interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions. This approach helped ensure that the findings were robust and not overly influenced by any single perspective. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions were conducted with colleagues who reviewed the research design, data generation methods, and findings to provide critical feedback and challenge assumptions.

#### *4.10.2 Impact of Researcher-Educator Dynamics*

The dynamics between myself as a researcher and an educator in the same institution also shaped the data generation and interpretation. As an educator, I had to be cautious about the power dynamics that could influence participants' responses. I had to create a comfortable and open environment, and efforts were made to establish rapport and assure participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Nonetheless, there is always a possibility that some participants may have provided socially desirable answers, especially regarding their perceptions of blended learning (Johnson, 2023).

#### *4.10.3 Reflexivity in Data Interpretation*

I consciously reflected on my interpretations during data analysis to ensure they accurately represented participants' experiences and perspectives. Engaging with the literature helped contextualise and compare the findings with existing research. For example, while my initial interpretation of the benefits of blended learning aligned with the positive experiences reported in the literature (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), the challenges identified through participant feedback added a necessary dimension of complexity that highlighted the nuanced reality of implementing blended learning in diverse contexts (Hrastinski, 2019).

#### *4.10.4 Continuous Reflexivity*

Reflexivity was an ongoing process throughout the study. Regular reflective journaling allowed me to document my thoughts, decisions, and potential biases at different stages of the research (Hrastinski, 2019). This practice helped me maintain transparency and recognise how my evolving understanding of the research topic influenced the study's direction.

### **4.11 Trustworthiness**

According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), trustworthiness creates trust in the research project's data generation, analysis, and findings. It comprises four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). This research used triangulation through data generation from different participants, namely educators and students, and techniques such as observation, interview, and focus groups to ensure discussion to mitigate these limitations. During the analysis, responses from educators and students were compared to ensure the robustness of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### *4.11.1 Credibility*

According to Patton (1999), credibility is determined by the reason for undertaking the study and how the data were collected. I ensured credibility by correctly interpreting the data, allowing participants to verify the interpreted findings, and seeking feedback from participants to ensure the accuracy of the data collected.

#### *4.11.2 Transferability*

Korstjens and Moser (2017) define transferability as the degree to which the qualitative research findings can be transferred in contexts with respondents other than those used in this research. It is thus equivalent to or replaces the term's generalisability and external validity. In this research,

I have comprehensively described the research sites, participants, and processes used to collect data for future studies.

#### *4.11.3 Dependability*

According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), dependability conveys the stability of the research findings over time. Dependability is determined by asking the research participants to evaluate findings, interpretations, and recommendations regarding what they have said during their interview. In this research, I ensured that data generation and interpretation of findings were articulated explicitly by citing the participants' exact words from the interviews. Dependability occurs when another researcher can follow the decision trail used by the researcher. I ensured dependability through techniques, keeping detailed records of the research process to ensure consistency over time. These included thick descriptions detailing rich data descriptions.

#### *4.11.4 Confirmability*

Confirmability is determined by the degree to which the research findings are confirmed by other researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2017), and the conclusions presented in the research are not speculative or imagined by the researcher. Instead, they are based on actual data gathered during the study, affirming the validity and reliability of the findings. This underscores that the conclusions are rooted in evidence rather than speculation. I ensured confirmability through the inclusion of information and opinions from participants. I remained unbiased in the process, so the findings were significant results of the collected data.

### **4.12 Limitations**

One limitation of this study is that the small number of participants and the tools used to gather information may not be enough to show ESL students' full range of writing and reading skills. This means that the results may not reflect the complete variability of students' skills, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings. Future research could involve larger sample sizes and more varied assessment tools to address this. I have acknowledged that this would limit the generalisability of the findings. I have also thoroughly analysed the data within the specified

context while highlighting the need for further research with more extensive and diverse samples. To address this, I discussed the administration process with other educators to ensure validity.

#### **4.13 Chapter Summary**

The methodology chapter outlined essential issues regarding the research on blended learning in ESL education at Tabuk University. Firstly, it emphasised the significance of the Community of Inquiry (COI) theory in understanding the complexities of blended learning through the interpretivist paradigm, which focused on the subjective experiences of ESL educators and students. The chapter further highlighted that the study used a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges and successes of ESL instruction and provide actionable recommendations for improving teaching practices. Ethical considerations were prioritised. These included obtaining permissions, ensuring participant confidentiality, and creating a comfortable research environment while dealing with potential researcher biases through reflexivity.

The chapter also highlighted the importance of trustworthiness, establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability through systematic data generation and analysis. However, it acknowledges limitations like sample size and diversity, suggesting the need for further research with larger, more varied samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. The perceived benefits of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction included increased flexibility, accessibility, and the ability to provide personalised learning experiences tailored to individual student needs.

## Chapter 5

### Presentation of Data

#### 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the methodology employed in this study. I explained the process of generating and analysing data to address the research questions. This chapter presents data from interviews with educators, classroom observations and focus group discussions with students at Tabuk University. Overall, this chapter summarises data generated on blended learning practices in ESL teaching at Tabuk University, shedding light on how educators and students engage with this instructional approach and its implications for learning ESL. The chapter unpacks the different experiences of educators and students.

#### 5.2 Summary of Data Generated from the Interviews

Below are data summaries from the interviews. Pseudonyms are used when referring to each educator. I used ten pre-planned, open-ended questions to generate data on the participants' perspectives regarding incorporating blended learning for teaching university students learning ESL (see Appendix 2). This approach provided valuable insights into how educators respond to blended learning, allowing me to capture their feelings, motivations, and meanings in their own words. The interviews were transcribed and shared with the participants to ensure their views and opinions were accurately captured. The presentation of the data below is a summarised version of the transcripts. Some questions have been grouped due to related or similar responses from the educators.

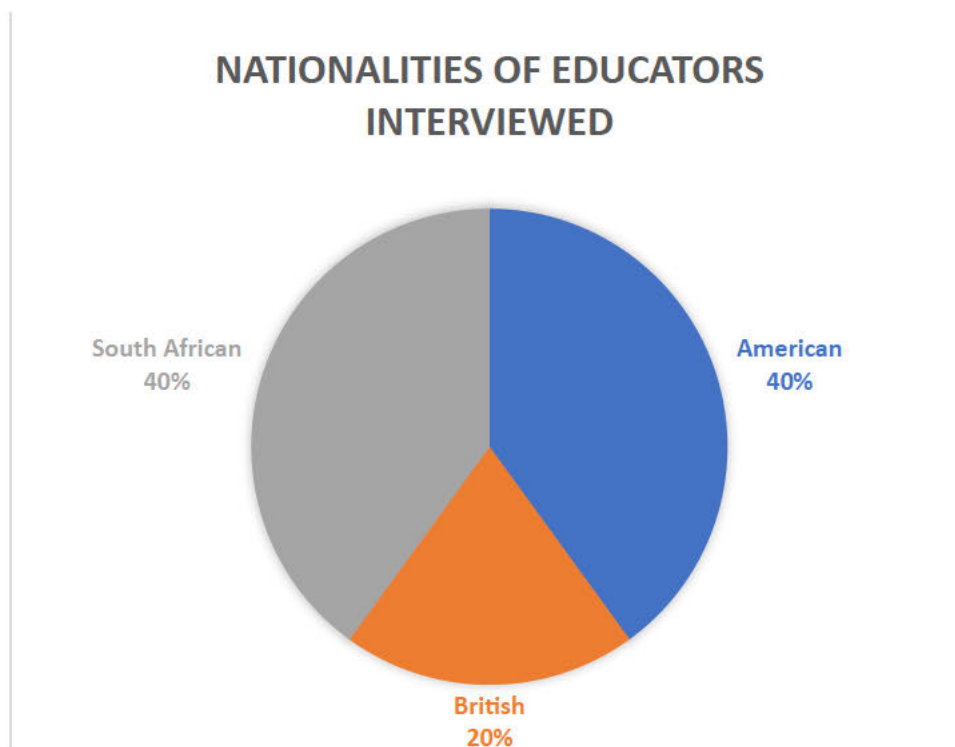
##### *5.2.1 Biographical Detail of Interview Participants*

The biographical details of the participants have been provided in Table 2 in Chapter 4. All five educators who participated in this study were female native English speakers employed as ESL educators at Tabuk University. They originated from three nationalities - South Africa, Britain, and the United States- as detailed in the pie chart in Figure 2 below. They specialise in teaching female ESL students through a blended learning approach. All the interviewed educators had

taught in multiple countries, including Saudi Arabia. Two educators had taught in America, two in South Africa, two in China, and one in Central Africa, England, and Spain. They all had many years of teaching experience. A common observation among them was the inadequacy of formal training in blended learning. Four of the educators' ages ranged between 20 and 49 years, with only one aged 50 and above, as shown in Figure 5.1 below.

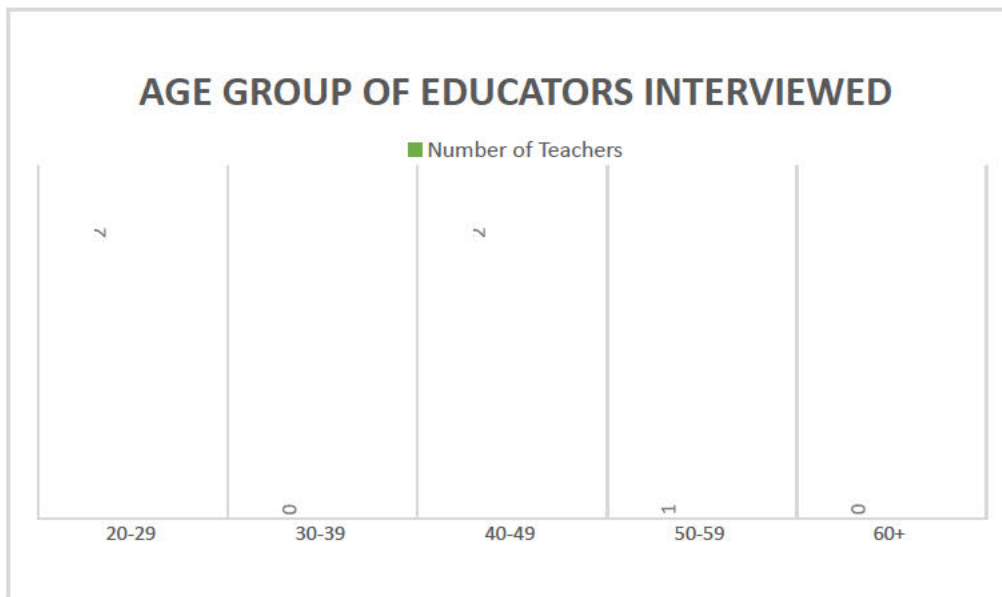
**Figure 2**

*Pie Chart: Nationalities of the Educators*



**Figure 3**

*Age Group of Educators*



### *5.2.2 Educator Preparedness and Professional Development*

Educator Liz Marshall finds technology challenging, particularly when managing large classes and group activities, as she has not received formal training in blended learning. Like Marshall, Educator Katie Austin struggles with minimal online engagement due to inadequate training in using online facilities.

While not formally trained, Educator Sandra Jamison has benefitted from her TESOL studies, which have familiarised her with the blended learning methods she continues developing. She attended workshops the university offers on various subjects, including blended learning. The speakers included university faculty members and guest speakers external from the university. She also attended regular meetings with the coordinator, and this platform allows her to ask for clarification on any work-related issue at any time, including on weekends.

Educator Sarah Smith has no prior training but learned through videos and is continually improving her blended learning skills. She has attended seminars and Webinars by senior management and speakers from Oxford University Press. Last year, the university invited

international guests to address them. She is also a mentor (coordinator) to guide her with work-related issues.

Educator Ruby Robinson received occasional training through webinars and guest speakers, with access to training videos for further reference. Additionally, she attends weekly meetings with the coordinator. Sometimes, the meetings are online, and sometimes they are in-person. These weekly meetings discuss the curriculum plan, work-related concerns, and curriculum progress.

### *5.2.3 How do you assess and provide feedback on language development and use in online discussions and assignments?*

Educator Liz Marshall has challenges with assessment. Her challenge is when students have to do speaking tasks and upload their recordings. She questions the authenticity of student submissions. She finds that there are limited kinds of assessments for speaking, but she is successful with reading, writing, and listening. Another type of assessment she uses is quizzes, which must be completed within a specific time. Sometimes, the students cannot complete their quizzes because of technical issues or other assignments.

Educator Katie Austin, the one challenge students face is transitioning from writing right to left and bottom to top, as they do in Arabic, to writing left to right and top to bottom in English.

Educator Sandra Jamison adapts informal assessments based on students' abilities by introducing concepts in class and having them apply their learning at home. Using an app, students upload their work within a set timeframe, allowing for autonomous learning outside class. The app provides online resources like listening activities, games, and reading materials. Blackboard is integrated into the online syllabus, providing access to course materials aligned with the textbook, including listening assessments, tests, and ongoing assessments, supporting students' learning needs throughout the course.

Educator Ruby Robinson, creating a supportive blended learning environment helps her students to overcome challenges, such as language, critical thinking, and communication skills. However, effectively assessing speaking and listening skills online remains a challenge. Students need to write sentences for new words taught weekly in their portfolios. However, a few students resort to copying from peers or using Google Translate. She resorts to positive reinforcement, occasionally giving incentives like chocolates, which motivates students and maintains their efforts.

Educator Sarah Smith, for formal assessments, the university gives rubrics. However, for informal assessments, she creates her own rubrics. Smith is flexible and responsive to her students' unique learning styles, abilities, interests, and backgrounds. When assessing students, she carefully considers various factors such as students' mixed abilities, maturity level, and religious, cultural and legal aspects. Sarah creates thought-provoking assessment questions requiring students to think critically and express their opinions, encouraging higher-order thinking. She also allows for peer assessment, where students evaluate each other's contributions, encouraging active participation. She also chooses relevant topics and uses various assessment techniques and tools to accurately gauge student learning and progress skills, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Students are pretty fair in their peer assessment, creating active and healthy competition in the classroom. Informal assessments are structured by using rubrics or guiding questions.

*5.2.4 Can you share examples of successful online collaborative learning experiences you have facilitated among ESL students?*

Educator Ruby Robinson mentioned that she “encourages peer interaction “and clearly defines the goals and objectives of online discussions, ensuring they align with language development and critical thinking skills. She argues this has been one of her ESL students' most successful online collaborative learning experiences.

Educator Sarah Smith has successfully collaborated on online group projects, where students collaborated on projects using tools like Google Docs, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, and

Duolingo. She also uses a website called Nearpod, which gamifies quizzes. Using apps like these makes students more excited and motivated to participate in activities. She has also used blended learning platforms to collect student performance and engagement data, allowing her to track progress, identify areas for improvement, and tailor instructions accordingly. This data-given approach enhanced the effectiveness of language instruction for her students.

Educator Sandra Jamison has recently begun using ChatGPT, an AI app, and she says she has been incredibly impressed with it. She comments that this app allows the students to cheat creatively.

#### *5.2.5 How do you address cultural differences and diversity among ESL students in your online classroom?*

Educator Liz Marshall, according to the Muslim religion, females are not allowed to show their faces. Therefore, during online classes, the students do not open their cameras. This cultural custom is a concern because she does not know whether the student is logged on in the online sessions or busy with other things instead. This cultural norm is a challenge in Saudi Arabia: online video lessons may be more achievable in different countries. As an educator, she is very conscious of the country's culture.

Educator Ruby Robinson allows students to discuss projects and assignments, being mindful to avoid discussing sensitive topics such as religious activities, especially given the location (Saudi Arabia). As an educator, she is very aware of cultural sensitivities and adheres to issues and discussions that are culturally appropriate. For example, culturally, it is not permissible for females to show their faces online, so Ruby ensures that students respond by calling their names and accepting responses through chat box if they prefer. Some students feel more comfortable writing in the chatbox due to shyness or difficulty pronouncing words, and she welcomes any form of participation. Ruby integrates cultural awareness activities into the curriculum, respecting and understanding the various cultures, traditions, customs, and perspectives. She encourages open communication, collaboration, and celebrating cultural holidays and events

while supporting language and cultural adjustment. She prioritises culturally appropriate resources like videos and articles to stimulate discussions and enrich learning in my classes.

Educator Sarah Smith educates herself about the various cultures represented in her class. She uses inclusive language and respects cultural differences, avoiding stereotypes and assumptions. Sarah is also mindful of cultural norms and customs when designing activities and discussions, ensuring they are culturally appropriate and inclusive. She creates opportunities for students to share aspects of their culture, traditions and experiences with the class, fostering mutual understanding and appreciation. Sarah also shares her cultural traditions and experiences with her classes. As an administrator for the WhatsApp group, she monitors inappropriate or culturally sensitive messages, removes the messages, and removes students who may not follow the group's rules.

*5.2.6 How do you design and facilitate online discussions to promote critical thinking and language development among ESL students? What strategies do you use to create community in your online classroom and encourage English language practice among your students?*

Educator Liz Marshall uses tools such as Blackboard and breakout rooms, polls, and WhatsApp, and these have proven effective in discussions and collaborative learning among my students. Fun polls act as engaging icebreakers, whether at the beginning, during, or after class breaks. She usually asks simple questions like favourite ice cream flavours or opinions on recent songs or travel destinations, encouraging participation in a light-hearted manner. Moreover, she utilises WhatsApp groups for informal communication, information sharing, and student interaction, fostering a sense of community. She employs breakout groups on Blackboard for more formal group work in smaller settings.

Educator Katie Austin tailors her teaching approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of her students, but her online engagement with students is minimal. Apart from grading assignments and managing attendance on specific platforms, she does not conduct much online teaching. Katie has not even set up a WhatsApp group for her students. She does not actively teach online. However, Katie ensures they are learning and not just completing assignments. She ensures that

she checks online to see whether the students are engaging and then reminds them to do what they need to do online during class hours. If Katie notices a student struggling to keep up, she will continue to engage with them in class. She primarily interacts with them during in-person classes, offering hands-on assistance to improve their grammar and other English language skills during class time.

Educator Sandra Jamison utilises various platforms, including apps like Blackboard, which offers online learning opportunities for students to engage in autonomous learning. One example is "reflections," which are integrated into the curriculum and introduced initially in the classroom. She incorporates interactive games during class to enhance engagement and introduce online learning. She includes a variety of PowerPoint slides to make activities enjoyable and accommodate students of different proficiency levels, occasionally making certain activities optional. Group work is encouraged, with stronger students often supporting peers who may need assistance or are less confident participating. She facilitates small group interactions to promote speaking skills, particularly for students who may be shy or hesitant to engage vocally. Additionally, she introduces various apps in her classroom to make learning fun and engaging, providing students with more opportunities to participate. Interactive games like Kahoot are among her tools, often incorporating timers during gameplay.

Educator Ruby Robinson offers reading and writing exercises, integrating language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—into every lesson, which is often tricky because she has a large class. She uses alternative communication channels like WhatsApp and incorporates interactive activities to engage students and improve learning outcomes. Ruby emphasises that fostering community during language practice promotes a positive and inclusive learning environment, enhancing student engagement. She utilises platforms like Blackboard, tailors resources to meet ESL students' needs and goals, and supplements materials with online books and educational websites. Ruby employs visual aids and group activities to encourage participation, while WhatsApp is a valuable tool for communication and comprehension support through translation features. Over and above, she often begins lessons with icebreakers to foster engagement, encouraging students to share and build community. Pronunciation and presentation practice are emphasised to complement students' strengths in memorisation.

Educator Sarah Smith uses many different types of multimedia, such as articles, videos, images, online games, and audio recordings, to provide multiple perspectives and stimulate discussion. She states that these platforms facilitate connections with other students for collaborative activities, which supplement online learning effectively. They work together by sharing their ideas. She found WhatsApp to be beneficial because it is an accessible resource. She employs differentiated teaching by offering extra support and personalised learning paths. It also uses bilingual dictionaries to aid comprehension.

Educator Sarah Smith further emphasised the importance of constructive feedback and active engagement. She encourages students to draw connections between sources and experience their thoughts using various media types. She also incorporates scaffolding concerning discussions by providing additional support and guidance. This is because there is a varying level of English competency in my classes. She encourages reflection, and this has been incorporated into our syllabus. She encourages students to reflect on their learning experiences and their strategies. She assesses their learning outcomes and evaluates their critical thinking skills and language development based on their participation in discussions. She uses interactive activities and gamified elements to enhance engagement and motivation. This mainly benefits ESL students by providing opportunities for authentic language use in diverse contexts and formats. It also offers extended practice opportunities outside the classroom through these exercises, interactive tutorials and multimedia resources. Students can engage in self-paced practice activities to reinforce language skills and concepts covered in class.

*5.2.7 How do you balance the need for structure and guidance in online learning with the need for student autonomy and self-direction? Can you share examples of successful online collaborative learning experiences you have facilitated among ESL students?*

Educator Sandra Jamison focuses on students shared cultural mistakes, particularly pronunciation and grammar. For example, in Saudi Arabia, culturally, they pronounce "p" as "b," saying "bark" instead of "park." During online discussions, she facilitates them to ensure active participation. She encourages students to provide constructive feedback to each other instead of

solely relying on her. She prompts them to listen to and comment on their peers' contributions within their smaller groups. For instance, if they discuss AI and its ethical implications, other groups provide feedback on their ideas. This feedback should be constructive, whether it is agreement, disagreement, or suggestions for improvement. Afterwards, she offers an overview of the discussions.

Educator Ruby Robinson, for assessments, provides general feedback. She offers personalised online feedback for formative and summative assessments, aligning with university rubrics to enhance learning outcomes.

Educator Sarah Smith also emphasises the importance of constructive feedback and active engagement through written comments and one-on-one discussions. She promotes collaborative learning, where students can learn from each other's perspectives. Sarah offers immediate feedback through interactive exercises like language games or near-pod activities. She highlights strengths, areas for improvement, language use and engagement. Students are encouraged to reflect on their performance and make necessary task adjustments. She also uses self-assessment with students, where students must reflect on their language development and participation. These are contained in a portfolio that the university assigns, and she reviews them periodically to assess students' progress in their work. She must also consider cultural differences in language expressions, providing feedback that respects diverse backgrounds and fosters a supportive learning environment. Assisting and giving input on language skills in online discussions and assignments involves careful planning and using various methods. She uses rubrics to clarify and outline language proficiency criteria for discussions and assignments. These help students understand expectations and ensure consistent accuracy, vocabulary, critical thinking, and collaboration feedback.

*5.2.8 How do you address language barriers or difficulties in online learning environments, particularly for ESL students? What are the most effective ways to use technology to support ESL language learning in blended learning environments?*

Educator Ruby Robinson, implementing innovative teaching methods to enhance learning experiences involves ensuring students have clear guidelines and expectations. She engages in scaffolded learning activities, breaking down complex tasks into smaller, more manageable ones for students. Additionally, Ruby offers flexibility and support with materials and resources to facilitate faster self-regulation and metacognition, which are crucial for their learning progress and reflection on their experiences. Fortunately, she has access to a whiteboard on their laptops, which she effectively uses for informal assessments in the classroom by typing questions and engaging with students as if she were standing in front of them. Ruby selects topics relevant to students' experiences and interests while also challenging enough to stimulate their critical thinking. She uses open-ended questions with engaging prompts to capture students' interest in the classroom activity. Ruby strives to motivate her students and encourage participation and discussion through these strategies. Additionally, she integrates culturally appropriate multimedia resources to enhance learning experiences. Her ultimate goal is to create a dynamic and interactive online learning environment that fosters critical thinking and language development among her ESL students.

*5.2.9 What challenges have you encountered in using blended learning to teach ESL, and how have you addressed these challenges?*

Educator Ruby Robinson, leveraging available resources creatively to address educational challenges is essential for creating an inclusive and supportive online learning environment. Technology challenges, such as device compatibility and platform glitches, can disrupt learning for ESL students at the university. To overcome this, accessing support resources is crucial.

Educator Sarah Smith has encouraged students to grow in their personal lives and become digitally literate because she has identified this as one of the significant challenges.

Educator Sandra Jamison, while technology is widely utilised, there are challenges with internet connectivity and data access for both students and educators.

Educator Liz Marshall, according to the Muslim religion, females are not allowed to show their faces. Therefore, during online classes, the students do not open their cameras. This is a concern because she does not know whether the student is logged on in the online sessions or busy with other things instead. This is a cultural challenge in Saudi Arabia: online video lessons may be more achievable in different countries. As an educator, she is very conscious of the country's culture.

### **5.3 Summary of Data Generated from Classroom Observations**

I observed five ESL classes, five classes were to see how blended learning affects students' participation, motivation and interaction. Each classroom observation took 150 minutes. The observation focused on social presence, cognitive presence, teaching presence, community, setting the climate, selecting content, and educational experience.

#### *5.3.1 Social Presence*

Educators consistently fostered social presence in the observed classes, creating an environment conducive to student interaction and collaboration. Educator Katie Austin's class emphasised empathy, kindness, and respect towards peers, fostering a supportive environment where students collaborated effectively and felt valued. This promoted positive social interactions and contributed to a sense of belonging among students.

Students in Educator Sandra Jamison's classroom actively listened to others' ideas, respecting diverse perspectives and promoting teamwork. This encouraged collaboration and the exchange of ideas among students, contributing to a vibrant learning environment. Educator Ruby Robinson's students demonstrated active engagement with the educator and their peers, indicating high interest and involvement in the classroom activities. This enthusiasm contributed to a positive classroom climate and enhanced the learning experience.

In Educator Sarah Smith's class, students collaborated effectively with peers and the educator, demonstrating trust and rapport while seeking assistance or guidance. This confidence and

connection fostered a supportive learning environment where students felt comfortable taking risks and exploring new ideas.

During my observation of Liz Marshall's classroom, I observed that students engaged in supportive, respectful, and inclusive social interactions. There was a noticeable positive learning environment. Social rapport and engagement among the students, students, and the educator were evident. Verbal interactions were frequent and meaningful, facilitating group discussions and learning exchanges. Moreover, nonverbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language were actively employed, enhancing communication and understanding in Liz's classroom. Overall, Liz skilfully integrated verbal and nonverbal communication to foster a conducive atmosphere for learning.

Table 3 captures how each educator fostered social presence in their classrooms, highlighting specific behaviours and interactions that contributed to a positive and collaborative learning environment.

**Table 3**  
*Social Presence in the Classrooms*

<b>Educator</b>	<b>Key Observations</b>	<b>Social Presence Indicators</b>
Katie Austin	Emphasised empathy, kindness, and respect, creating a supportive environment. Students collaborated effectively and felt valued.	Empathy, Kindness, Respect, Collaboration
Sandra Jamison	Students actively listened, respected diverse perspectives, and promoted teamwork, encouraging idea exchange and creating a vibrant environment.	Active Listening, Respect, Teamwork
Ruby Robinson (online)	Students demonstrated high interest and involvement, contributing to a positive classroom climate and enhanced learning experience.	Active Engagement, High Interest

Sarah Smith	Students collaborated effectively with peers and the educator, demonstrating trust and rapport and seeking assistance when needed.	Trust, Rapport, Collaboration, Confidence
Liz Marshall	I observed supportive, respectful, and inclusive social interactions, with frequent, meaningful verbal and nonverbal communication.	Social Rapport, Engagement, Verbal/Nonverbal

### 5.3.2 Cognitive Presence

In the observed classrooms, educators focused on fostering cognitive presence by engaging students in critical thinking tasks related to first-impression accuracy. Through structured debates, group discussions, role-plays, and critical thinking exercises, students analysed scenarios involving first impressions, evaluated opposing viewpoints and proposed alternative approaches. These activities aimed to develop students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and evidence-based reasoning skills, essential for academic success and societal engagement.

Additionally, the observed classrooms facilitated the exchange, application, and connection of ideas among students, further enhancing cognitive presence. Educators prompted students to apply new concepts in practical contexts, fostering active learning and comprehension. The diverse assessment strategies aligned with class objectives and promoted cognitive engagement. Furthermore, the adaptation of instructional tools and approaches, such as scaffolding techniques and translation tools, demonstrated efforts to support students' varying needs and ensure inclusivity, contributing to cognitive presence in the learning environment.

Table 4 below captures how educators fostered cognitive presence in their classrooms by engaging students in various activities and adapting instructional strategies to meet diverse needs.

**Table .4**  
***Cognitive Presence in the Classrooms***

<b>Educator</b>	<b>Key Observations</b>	<b>Cognitive Presence Indicators</b>
General Observations	Engaged students in critical thinking tasks related to first-impression accuracy through structured debates, group discussions, roleplays, and critical thinking exercises.	Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving, Evidence-Based Reasoning
Specific Activities	Analysed scenarios involving first impressions, evaluated opposing viewpoints and proposed alternative approaches.	Scenario Analysis, Viewpoint Evaluation, Alternative Proposals
Exchange of Ideas	Facilitated the exchange, application, and connection of ideas among students, enhancing cognitive presence.	Idea Exchange, Practical Application, Concept Connection
Active Learning	Prompted students to apply new concepts in practical contexts, fostering active learning and comprehension.	Active Learning, Comprehension
Assessment Strategies	Utilised diverse assessment strategies aligned with class objectives, promoting cognitive engagement.	Diverse Assessments, Cognitive Engagement
Inclusivity Efforts	Adapted instructional tools and approaches, such as scaffolding techniques and translation tools, to support students' varying needs.	Scaffolding, Translation Tools, Inclusivity

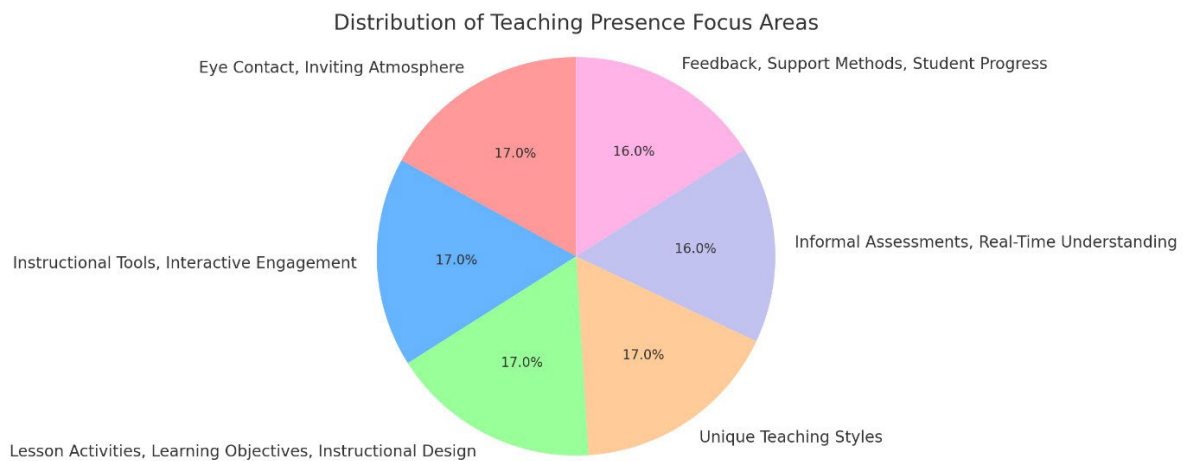
### 5.3.3 Teaching Presence

Figure 5.3, below, is a pie chart that visualises the different focus areas of teaching presence observed in the educators' classrooms (contact and online). Each segment represents a key aspect, showing the distribution of emphasis placed on various teaching strategies and tools. There is no

significant difference in the emphasis, but it is important to note that feedback and assessment are the two that scored 16%.

### Figure 5.3

*Distribution of Teaching Presence Focus Areas*



Regarding teaching presence, as shown in the pie chart above, the observed educators demonstrated various strategies to engage students effectively and create a conducive learning environment. Educator Liz Marshall employed a democratic teaching style during debates, fostering student engagement and participation. Educator Katie Austin facilitated discussions with thought-provoking questions, stimulating critical thinking among students. Educator Sandra Jamison's effective course design ensured comprehension, while Educator Ruby Robinson emphasised clear explanations to enhance understanding. Educator Sarah Smith utilised visual aids and clear instructions to aid comprehension. Moreover, all educators-maintained eye contact, creating a warm and inviting classroom atmosphere.

Adapting instructional tools and facilitating activities by educators highlight their teaching presence. They scaffold learning by providing support and utilising interactive tools to enhance engagement. Additionally, aligning lesson activities with learning objectives indicates effective

instructional design and planning, further enhancing teaching presence in the learning environment.

Each educator's unique teaching style reflects their style in the classroom. Informal assessments, such as observation and questioning, enable real-time assessment of student understanding, contributing to teaching presence. Overall, the observed feedback and support methods demonstrate effective teaching presence in tracking student progress and achieving learning objectives.

#### *5.3.4 Supporting Discourse*

In the context of supporting discourse, the observed educators implemented various strategies to foster meaningful interactions and discussions among students. Some of the approaches observed include the following:

Educator Liz Marshall encouraged students to participate in structured debates, providing guidance and scaffolding to ensure that all voices were heard and respected. Educator Katie Austin prompted students with thought-provoking questions, stimulating critical thinking and encouraging deeper reflection. Educator Sandra Jamison and Educator Ruby Robinson utilised role-plays and scenarios to illustrate concepts and encourage students to explore different perspectives and viewpoints. Educator Sarah Smith employed visual aids and clear instructions to aid comprehension and ensure that students understood the tasks and objectives of the discourse activities. In all observed classrooms, educators promoted active listening and respect for diverse viewpoints, creating an inclusive environment where students felt valued and supported in expressing their ideas.

#### *5.3.5 Selecting Content*

From the observation, it is evident that educators prioritise selecting content that aligns with the learning objectives of the ESL class. The assessment strategies, such as debates, role-plays, presentations, and group discussions, are tailored to evaluate students' comprehension of the

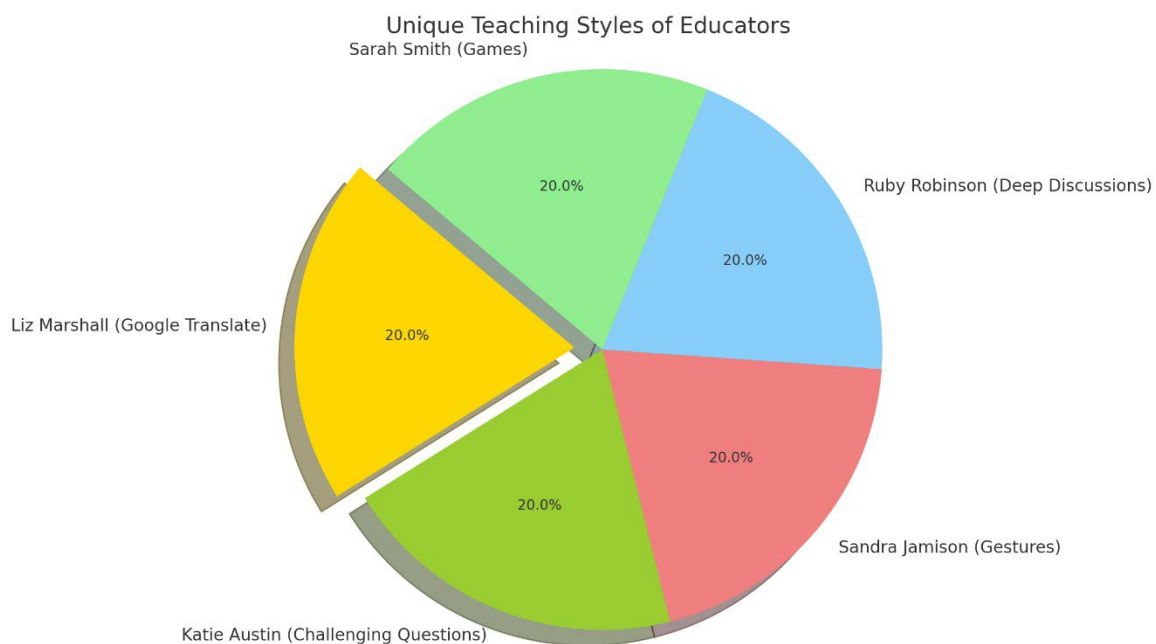
topic of first impressions. This indicates a thoughtful selection of content that covers the subject matter and engages students in critical thinking and practical application.

### 5.3.6 Educational Experience

From the observation of the classes, each educator showcases a unique teaching style based on their background and training. For example, below is the pie chart visualising the unique teaching styles of the educators based on the observed classes.

**Figure 5.4**

*Unique Teaching Styles of Educators*



As shown above, Educator Liz Marshall utilises Google Translate to support students with diverse language needs, while Educator Katie Austin poses challenging questions to stimulate critical thinking. Educator Sandra Jamison's use of gestures and Educator Ruby Robinson's deep discussions demonstrate their experience in engaging students effectively. These varied approaches reflect the educators' educational experiences and expertise, which inform their

decisions in selecting content and designing instructional activities tailored to their students' needs. Educator Sarah Smith employed games to actively engage her students in the lesson, fostering participation and enhancing learning through interactive activities. Her approach effectively made the students' learning experience more dynamic and enjoyable.

### *5.3.7 Setting the Climate*

In setting the climate in the observed classrooms, the educators prioritised creating environments characterised by comfort, engagement, and support. For example, Educator Liz Marshall established a serene and relaxed atmosphere where students felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions during discussions. Setting a calm and relaxed atmosphere created a safe space for students to express themselves without fear of judgment. Overall, the educators in the observed classrooms delivered academic content and nurtured social and emotional skills by creating inclusive and supportive environments. This helped students feel valued, respected, and motivated to participate actively in their learning journey.

## **5.4 Summary of Data Generated from Focus Group Discussions**

As mentioned in this chapter and Chapter 4, all the focus group participants were female students from Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia. There were five focus groups, with five students in each group, each representing one of the five educators I interviewed. Pseudonyms were used to refer to each student. All 25 participating students in this study were native Arabic-speaking females 18 and older. They were learning ESL using a blended learning approach. The focus group discussions aimed to understand students' experiences and perceptions of using blended learning in an ESL class. All data generated from the focus group was transcribed and coded using keywords. After developing initial codes, I began to organise these codes into potential themes. This involved clustering related codes and identifying broader patterns from the data. For instance, codes related to student engagement, accessibility, and technological support were grouped under overarching themes that illustrated how ESL students and educators perceived blended learning.

Once potential themes were identified, I reviewed them to ensure they accurately represented the data. This involved checking the themes against the coded data and the entire dataset, including the interview themes, to confirm that they captured the essence of the participants' experiences. Themes that did not fit well were refined or discarded, leading to a more coherent set of themes that reflected the findings. The process resulted in the five (5) themes presented in Table 5 below and their linkage to the COI framework.

**Table 5**

*Themes and COI Framework Concepts*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>COI Framework Concepts</b>
<b>Engagement and Collaboration</b>	Active Participation, Peer Collaboration, Respect for Diverse Perspectives,	Social Presence
<b>Critical Thinking and Application</b>	Critical Analysis, Problem-Solving, Real-World Relevance	Cognitive Presence
<b>Instructional Clarity and Stimulation</b>	Thought-provoking questions, Clear Instructions, Intellectual Stimulation	Teaching Presence
<b>Technical and Emotional Support</b>	Use of Visual Aids, Interactive Tools, Technological Engagement Trust and Rapport, Supportive Environment, Empathy and Kindness, Emotional Safety	Teaching Presence Social Presence
<b>Language and Independence Support</b>	Use of Translation Tools, Student Autonomy	Teaching Presence

#### *5.4.1 Engagement and Collaboration*

All groups recognised educators' crucial role in fostering a positive learning environment through online facilitation, with varied focuses on outcomes like critical thinking, collaboration, and community building.

Group 1: Rosetta Rodrigues, Gaia Drakes, and Ayla Alexandra highlighted the importance of educators in online discussions, emphasising improved student engagement. Gaia Drakes mentioned educators' active participation, aligning with Rosetta Rodrigues' focus on community building. However, Ayla Alexandra's response lacked specifics regarding educators' support. She explained, "Coming from a large family, my home is often crowded, making it difficult to study online. There is always background noise whenever I record my submissions on Blackboard." Reema Mars emphasised critical thinking and teamwork as outcomes, contrasting with Rosetta Rodrigues and Gaia Drakes' focus on interaction. Olivia Grace uniquely highlighted language skill development. Overall, they agreed on the educator's crucial role in online learning, offering distinct perspectives.

Group 2: Students in this group had differing views on how educators' online support affects engagement. Kadi Abdullah mentioned that educators connect them worldwide using online tools, while Mona Jaman felt educators' active involvement changes learning materials into lively discussions. Amal Abdullah lives in an extended family. She said, "I share my room with my sisters and grandma." She cannot concentrate on studying at home, so the university provides a good learning environment for her. Amal Abdullah and Rimas Khalid agreed that it helps them interact better with classmates and learn more. Malak Mohammad also agreed, mentioning how it improves learning with classmates. Although they all saw the benefits of online support, they each perceived different ways it helps, from global connections to livelier discussions.

Group 3: The students offered various opinions on how educators' online support affects engagement. Marie Ali and Ryana Fahad find chatting with friends and classmates online makes learning more enjoyable and helps them understand homework better. They appreciate how it feels to have a class discussion online, which allows them to feel more connected to their class. Adira Mohammad also values the ease of interaction with classmates online, finding it comfortable. Dana Ahmad echoed the sentiment of enjoying talking online with educators and classmates, finding it fun and collaborative. Wrood Aziz emphasised the importance of educators creating a positive online environment, which enhances enjoyment and engagement with the course and classmates. Wrood Aziz said, "I am from Al Alula, another city. I live alone and have

to do lots of chores at home. I do not have time to attend university, but I still maintain my household chores.” While they all appreciated the benefits of online facilitation, they differed slightly in their emphasis, from enjoyment to collaboration and a positive learning environment.

Group 4: Students in this group had different views on how educators help them online. Rana Rafiq appreciates educators' activities and feedback, which encourages her to participate. Student Sarah Osman believes using social media for extra content improves learning. Rima Ebeid feels online learning can be lonely but addictive. Maria Davidson acknowledged how educators' active involvement boosts discussions and believes that discussions and collaboration enhance learning. Bella Morrison believes online teaching builds community and improves understanding. They all agreed that online teaching impacts engagement but focuses on motivation, community, and collaboration.

Group 5: Students in this group have differing opinions about how educators' online facilitation impacts engagement. Abby Scott thinks guiding discussions encourages enjoyment and interaction, fostering a supportive environment. Lama Clark agreed, saying it boosts engagement with course materials and peers. Lisa Campbell finds social media efficient for sharing resources benefiting from peers' knowledge. Lisa Campbell said, “I am married with a child and live with an extended family. Managing household responsibilities and caring for my husband, his parents, and my child is time-consuming. However, the educators supported me by providing study materials that I could use.” Student Sarah Rafiq emphasised timely feedback to enhance learning experiences. Arianne Miller stressed the role of online platforms in building community and improving engagement. They all recognised the positive impact but focused on enjoyment, efficiency, feedback, and community.

#### *5.4.2 Critical Thinking and Application*

All groups concurred that critical thinking skills are developed through blended learning. Students engage in critical thinking by reflecting on videos for assessment on Blackboard and also use critical thinking in the classroom to assess and express ideas on various subjects.

Group 1: Blended learning enriches critical thinking via online discussions and group projects, as noted by Gaia Drakes. Ayla Alexandra agreed, emphasising the advantages of blended learning. These students unanimously stated that they engage in critical thinking when they reflect on videos watched in class for assessment purposes.

Group 2: Kadi Abdullah noted that blended learning exposes them to diverse activities and materials, enhancing critical thinking, which helps in understanding and communicating in English. Mona Jaman, Rimas Khalid, Amal Abdullah, and Malak Mohammad echoed similar sentiments regarding the benefits of blended learning. Malak Mohammad observed that blended learning is a valuable tool for developing critical thinking skills in English.

Group 3: Blended learning has been vital in boosting critical English thinking skills, as Dana Ahmad and Wrood Aziz stated. Online activities allow for the analysis of information and the development of personal opinions, as experienced by Marie Ali. Ryana Fahad has found that studying at university and at home aids in better information retention. Adira Mohammad highlighted how blended learning has improved her problem-solving and research abilities in English. All group members recognised the evidence supporting blended learning's role in critical thinking development.

Group 4: Student Sarah Osman mentioned that blended learning has dramatically improved her English thinking skills, a sentiment echoed by Rana Rafiq. Rima Ebeid acknowledged the benefits of blended learning, and Maria Davidson and Bella Morrison also recognised its positive impact on critical thinking. They all agreed with Student Sarah Osman's observation that online activities aid practice and class discussions improve understanding of English. Despite varying personal experiences, all recognised the benefits of blended learning.

Group 5: Abby Scott has found that blended learning, combining traditional methods with online resources, has significantly improved her critical thinking in English. Arianne Miller's engagement in online discussions and literature analysis has fostered problem-solving and broadened her perspective through interactive exercises. At the same time, Student Sarah Rafiq

applies critical thinking to question different aspects of life. Lama Clark believes blended learning enhances her ability to analyse diverse perspectives and express thoughts, particularly in online discussions, stressing the importance of critical thinking to avoid unquestioningly accepting information.

#### *5.4.3 Instructional Clarity and Stimulation*

Group 1: Students stated that educators sometimes facilitate opportunities to connect and learn beyond the blended learning classroom through various means, including online language communities, forums, social media study groups, virtual workshops, and online classes. All the students from this group recognised educators' vital role in offering learning opportunities beyond the classroom, which helps them develop English language skills.

Differences arose in the activities and approaches discussed by each student. While Olivia Grace mentioned attending online classes, Gaia Drakes and others focused on online language communities and forums. Ayla Alexandra stood out for emphasising homework assignments and watching online clips. At the same time, Reema Mars stressed the importance of accurate communication and providing correct information by educators, prioritising clarity over specific platforms or activities.

Group 2: All the students in this group revealed that educators play a crucial role in facilitating opportunities for English language students to connect and learn from each other outside the classroom. Educators organise language exchange programmes and virtual language branches to enhance language skills through interaction with native English speakers. Malak Mohammad said, "In class, we work in groups for some activities on online platforms like WhatsApp. I enjoy group work as my friends assist me and encourage me to talk, but I am timid because I do not know many English words." Students expressed that they appreciate opportunities such as casual conversations and movie outings, which improve fluency and understanding.

Kadi Abdullah and Rimas Khalid emphasised the importance of language exchange programmes and online discussion groups. Mona Jaman highlighted casual language exchanges organised by educators. Amal Abdullah elaborated on virtual language exchange programmes and interactions with native speakers outside formal settings like the cinema. Malak Mohammad echoed the sentiment of organised activities but did not provide specific examples. These differences showcased varied approaches to facilitating learning opportunities beyond the classroom.

Group 3: The students discussed how educators use online tools to connect English language students beyond the classroom. Wrood Aziz mentioned chat rooms for practice, while Ryana Fahad highlighted learning through games and chats with friends. Marie Ali focused on friendships formed with English speakers, aiding in learning English through casual conversation. Dana Ahmad and Adira Mohammad stressed the educators' role in fostering interaction outside class, like through online discussions. They all emphasised how these connections enhance language skills and make learning enjoyable.

Group 4: The students discussed how educators facilitate connections among English language students outside of blended learning courses. Maria Davidson mentioned language exchanges, online communities, and collaboration projects, enhancing communication with classmates. Bella Morrison highlighted online forums, study groups, and virtual exchanges, fostering speaking and writing practice. Rana Rafiq described language exchange programmes and conversation clubs, including WhatsApp video calls with English-speaking peers. Student Sarah Osman mentioned that educators provide platforms for language exchange activities and online gaming as additional opportunities. Rima Ebeid emphasised integrated learning methods with native speakers, expanding opportunities for student interaction and learning.

Group 5: The group stated that their educators provide language exchange programmes where students can interact with peers who are native speakers of English. This allows for cultural exchange and language and real-life context. “The English educators arranged for us to watch an English movie. After that, we spoke to other native English speakers,” says Arianne Miller.

The speakers differed in educators' methods and approaches to facilitate student interactions and learning outside the blended learning courses. Abby Scott mentioned that educators facilitate language exchange programmes so students can learn from each other. At the same time, Arianne Miller emphasised cultural exchange and interactions with native English speakers organised by educators. Lisa Campbell highlighted that educators provide various learning options, including recorded lectures and video resources, to accommodate different learning styles. Student Sarah Rafiq stated that she communicates with other students through WhatsApp groups and sometimes uses Snapchat to create or join groups.

#### *5.4.4 Technical and Emotional Support*

Group 1: All students highlighted the crucial role of educators in helping them overcome challenges in blended learning, particularly regarding language barriers or technical issues. They mentioned receiving support from educators to improve language skills through clear instructions, encouragement to repeat and improve pronunciation, or assistance with vocabulary. While some students, like Gaia Drakes and Rosetta Rodrigues, emphasised receiving language support and clear instructions from educators, others, such as Ayla Alexandra and Olivia Grace, focused on areas of improvement like pronunciation and vocabulary. Reema Mars appreciates her educators' focus on addressing weaknesses and improving overall learning trends in blended learning.

Group 2: All students spoke about how educators help them overcome challenges in their blended learning courses, particularly with language barriers and technology issues. Their educators give clear explanations, extra assistance, and additional materials to improve understanding and language skills.

Kadi Abdullah and Mona Jaman highlighted the educators' role in providing extra support, clear explanations, and language assistance to navigate challenges in blended learning. Amal Abdullah added that educators offer additional materials, suggest language apps, and organise practice sessions to address language and technology issues. Rimas Khalid mentioned that educators support students in learning English and utilising technology for skill enhancement. Meanwhile,

Malak Mohammad underscored educators' instrumental role in overcoming challenges without specifying support methods.

Group 3: Educators were praised for their clear explanations, use of visuals, and patience in helping students with technical issues, making learning more accessible. They also encourage students to engage with online resources and provide support by breaking down homework problems and assisting with technology-related challenges, facilitating students' language abilities and effective use of technology. All students recognised the invaluable support from their educators in overcoming challenges in blended learning. They value clear explanations and visual aids. Wrood Aziz emphasised visual vocabulary explanations and online resource encouragement. Ryana Fahad highlighted direct educator assistance, Marie Ali emphasised homework simplification and technology help, Adira Mohammad focused on language improvement support, and Dana Ahmad mentioned technology training. These differences highlight educators' varied approaches to aiding students, reflecting individual needs.

Group 4: Educators are crucial in helping students overcome challenges encountered in blended learning courses, particularly those related to language barriers and technology issues. They offer various forms of support, including clear explanations, suggested resources, technical assistance, and tailored activities to aid comprehension and skill development. Rana Rafiq mentioned clear explanations and technical assistance, Student Sarah Osman highlighted the creation of a supportive environment and guidance on using Google translation, Rima Ebeid discussed the use of chat activities for translation and breaking down complex words, Bella Morrison emphasised tailored instructions and extra support, and Maria Davidson mentioned personalised teaching methods and assistance with technical issues like password recovery. These differences reflect the diverse ways in which educators address students' needs and challenges in blended learning environments.

Group 5: Students said educators play a significant role in assisting students in overcoming challenges encountered in blended learning courses, particularly those related to language barriers and technology issues. They provide various forms of support, including clear communication, language assistance, technical guidance, and assistance with using language

tools or software. Differences among the speakers included the specific methods of support mentioned and the individualised approaches educators took. Abby Scott emphasised the curriculum role of educators, Lisa Campbell highlighted clear communication and technical assistance, Lama Clark discussed support with language barriers and technology issues, Arianne Miller mentioned assistance with English language retention, and Student Sarah Rafiq addressed the provision of language tools and assistance with technical issues like password recovery. These differences illustrate the varied ways in which educators support students in blended learning environments.

#### *5.4.5 Language and Independent Support*

Group 1: Students discussed improving their English skills through blended learning. They utilise online resources like YouTube to supplement their learning and apply what they learn in interactions with classmates and native English-speaking educators. Rosetta Rodrigues emphasised the importance of clear explanations in English language learning, while Ayla Alexandra watched English language teaching videos on YouTube. Gaia Drakes values the accessibility of English resources online. Reema Mars learns from mistakes and utilises educational YouTube videos to enhance her English language proficiency.

Group 2: Students focused on the practical application of English skills learned in blended learning classes in daily life, highlighting improved communication, confidence, and understanding of media. While Kadi Abdullah and Malak Mohammad emphasised effective communication and daily life benefits, Mona Jaman and Amal Abdullah mentioned comprehensive improvements, including peer interactions and engagement with course materials. There was variation in the specific skills emphasised, with some highlighting communication while others focused on comprehension and overall interaction. Additionally, the examples provided showcased diverse ways English language skills are applied in daily life, such as chatting with friends and discussing topics with peers.

Group 3: Students in this group shared how they apply their English language skills in various real-life situations. Ryana Fahad and Marie Ali mentioned understanding English media and

communicating in class and online. At the same time, Adira Mohammad emphasised using skills from blended learning in activities like watching YouTube videos, interacting with shopkeepers, and reading signs. Dana Ahmad talked about using reading and coding to learn English, while Wrood Aziz said online classes help her learn new words and practice English with friends. Although the main similarity lay in using English skills in real-life situations, the methods and contexts differed among the students.

Group 4: Students mentioned applying the English language skills learned in blended learning courses to daily life activities such as communication, writing emails, watching English movies, and engaging in conversations. Rana emphasised practical applications like communication, writing, and listening, mentioning gaining confidence in using English in various situations at university. However, Rima Ebeid and Maria Davidson provided hypothetical examples due to a lack of personal experiences. At the same time, Student Sarah Osman focuses on practising English in real-life situations like shopping, and Bella Morrison emphasises conversation and text generation for different purposes.

Group 5: Students discussed applying English language skills learned in blended learning courses to daily life, focusing on practical applications such as improved writing skills. Blended learning helps students improve their communication skills. Abby Scott says it improves writing, which is vital for writing emails, reports, and social media posts. Lama Clark says that better writing also helps with speaking and listening. Lisa Campbell says these skills help in meetings, presentations, and casual conversations. Using tools like Snapchat or forming discussion groups, as Sarah Rafiq suggests, and chatting online about global topics, as Arianne Miller suggests, gives students many ways to practice and improve their communication skills. This approach helps students do well both in university and in real life. While focusing on practical applications, the students' specific contexts and methods varied.

## **5.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter offered a synthesis of data gathered regarding the engagement of educators and students in both online and in-person learning settings at Tabuk University, focusing on teaching and learning ESL. Through interviews and group discussions, educators and students shared their

perspectives, offering valuable insights into the effects of blended learning on English language acquisition. Additionally, observations conducted within the natural classroom environment provided further understanding of the varied approaches employed by educators and students in their language learning journey. In the subsequent chapter, I delve into the findings derived from this data.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

This qualitative study aimed to explore and understand the blended learning practices in ESL teaching at Tabuk University, including the perceived benefits concerning female students' attitudes, satisfaction, engagement, and learning. This chapter provides the analysis and discussion of findings from data from classroom observations, interviews with educators, and focus group discussions with students as discussed in Chapter 4, analysed according to the study's research questions, which aligns with Garrison et al. (2010) COI framework. Direct participant quotes aligned with the literature will support the analysis and discussion.

Data was analysed, and participants' responses were interpreted using inductive methods. This was done to identify the themes. Five themes emerged from this analysis, which will be elaborated on in the following section. These themes were aligned with the COI framework and relevant literature. The subsequent sections of this chapter present the analysed data and ends with a discussion of the findings.

#### **6.2 Summary of Demographics**

I observed five lessons focusing on content, student participation and the observable behaviour of students and educators. I interviewed five native English speakers employed as ESL educators at Tabuk University—two from America, two from South Africa, and one from the UK. I used pre-planned, open-ended questions to capture their experiences and perceptions with blended learning, closely observing their verbal and non-verbal cues. There were five groups of five students per focus group, totalling 25. The students were all Arabic-speaking undergraduate students.

### 6.3 Analysis of Results

This research explored how ESL educators at Tabuk University integrate blended learning using the COI framework to achieve learning goals. Data analysis from this study resulted in five (5) themes, as tabulated in Table 5, which will be discussed in detail in the sections below.

Table 6.1

#### *Themes and COI Framework Concepts*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>COI Framework Concepts</b>
<b>Engagement and Collaboration</b>	Active Participation, Peer Collaboration, Respect for Diverse Perspectives,	Social Presence
<b>Critical Thinking and Application</b>	Critical Analysis, Problem-Solving, Real-World Relevance	Cognitive Presence
<b>Instructional Clarity and Stimulation</b>	Thought-Provoking Questions, Clear Instructions, Intellectual Stimulation	Teaching Presence
<b>Technical and Emotional Support</b>	Use of Visual Aids, Interactive Tools, Technological Engagement Trust and Rapport, Supportive Environment, Empathy and Kindness, Emotional Safety	Teaching Presence Social Presence
<b>Language and Independence Support</b>	Use of Translation Tools, Student Autonomy	Teaching Presence

#### *6.3.1 Engagement and Collaboration*

This study's findings reveal a solid social presence, encompassing students' active participation in a collaborative learning environment, facilitating open communication and mutual respect among peers and instructors.

Data revealed that educators at Tabuk University employed various strategies to foster social presence, as presented in Table 3 Figures 4 and 5, creating a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and engaging with peers and instructors (Garrison et al., 2010; McKerlich et al., 2011). The consistent efforts of educators in cultivating social presence at Tabuk University have created a supportive and engaging learning environment, enhancing the overall educational experience for ESL students. These teaching methods and activities have fostered community, allowing students to share perspectives and build interpersonal connections. Below are some direct quotes from the educators.

I use tools such as Blackboard and breakout rooms, which have proved helpful in discussions and collaborative learning among my students. (Educator Liz Marshall)

I use the "think, write, pair, and share" concept to promote collaborative learning and boost students' self-confidence in a mixed-ability class. (Educator Sandra Jamison)

Peer interaction is encouraged. Students need to write sentences for new words taught weekly in their portfolios. Positive reinforcement, including occasional incentives like chocolates, motivates students and maintains their efforts. Fostering community during language practice promotes a positive and inclusive learning environment, enhancing student engagement. (Educator Ruby Robinson)

I promote collaborative learning, where students can learn from each other's perspectives. I offer immediate feedback through interactive exercises like language games or Nearpod activities. I highlight strengths, areas for improvement, language use and engagement. Students are encouraged to reflect on their performance and make necessary task adjustments. I also have to consider cultural differences in language expressions,

providing feedback that respects diverse backgrounds and fosters a supportive learning environment. (Educator Sarah Smith)

Other educators mentioned that:

I often begin lessons with icebreakers to foster engagement, encouraging students to share and build a sense of community. Pronunciation and presentation practice are emphasised to complement student's strengths in memorisation. (Educator Ruby Robinson)

Focus group discussions also confirmed the above, as students mentioned that they value educators who use technology to create engaging, interactive learning experiences. Students said they appreciate clear instructions, timely feedback, and personalised support. Chen et al. (2018) maintains that giving immediate corrective feedback in a blended learning environment helps improve students' academic ability. Educators consistently fostered social presence in the observed classes, creating an environment conducive to student interaction and collaboration.

Positive social interactions contributed to a sense of belonging among students.

Leveraging technology allows educators to provide personalised, interactive activities catering to diverse student needs. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) emphasise using technology to facilitate constructivist learning, enhancing language acquisition and retention. Dana Ahmad from focused group 3 stated, "I like using interactive activities like quizzes and videos in our online classes. It makes learning more fun and helps me understand better."

The findings above show that blended learning may be a more engaging and satisfying approach to learning than traditional face-to-face instruction. According to Evans et al. (2003), students learn better when exposed to a flexible learning environment. Their study highlights that students show positive outcomes, including improved language proficiency, enhanced academic performance, and higher levels of student satisfaction. On the other hand, multimedia resources

like videos and interactive quizzes integrated into lessons make learning more engaging and enjoyable for students (Shea & Bidjerano, 2012; Suhail et al., 2012; Yu et al., 2023).

This research finding has similar dynamics in ESL instruction, recognising the importance of educators' presence in facilitating compelling language learning experiences, which involves active verbal and non-verbal communication between students and educators, fostering an atmosphere of openness and collaboration (McKerlich et al., 2011). Research by ElSayad (2023) stresses the educators' role in promoting community and interaction, positively influencing social presence and learning outcomes. This promotes a supportive learning environment, enhancing student engagement and motivation in ESL instruction (Garrison et al., 1999).

The above further confirms that implementing blended learning in ESL instruction offers benefits such as enhanced student engagement, increased peer interaction, and a supportive learning community. Therefore, this study's findings reveal a solid social presence, encompassing students' active participation in a collaborative learning environment, facilitating open communication and mutual respect among peers and educators.

### *6.3.2 Critical Thinking and Application*

The results from this study suggest that blended learning facilitates a higher level of cognitive presence by carefully planning lessons that include problem-solving tasks, debates, and reflective activities. Data reveal that educators promote profound language proficiency and academic competence among ESL students by integrating language learning with meaningful content. They tailor resource materials to match students' proficiency levels, learning goals, and interests, incorporating authentic texts and interactive activities that cater to diverse learning styles. These include engaging texts, audio-visual resources, and real-world tasks that prompt students to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information in English. Moreover, educators integrate culturally and sensitivity-relevant content to foster inclusivity and enhance the overall English learning experience. This approach promotes more profound understanding and encourages independence and problem-solving skills among students, which are essential for long-term academic success.

I tailor my teaching approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of my students, but my online engagement with my students is minimal. Apart from grading assignments and managing attendance on specific platforms, I do not conduct much online teaching. Surprisingly, I have not even set up a WhatsApp group for my students. Instead, I primarily interact with them during in-person classes, offering hands-on assistance to improve their grammar and other English language skills during class time. (Kate Austin)

I tailor resources to meet ESL students' needs and goals, supplementing materials with online books and educational websites. I employ visual aids and group activities to encourage participation. (Educator Ruby Robinson)

I encourage students to provide constructive feedback to each other instead of solely relying on me. I prompt them to listen to and comment on their peers' contributions within their smaller groups. For instance, if they discuss AI and its ethical implications, other groups provide feedback on their ideas. This feedback should be constructive, whether it is agreement, disagreement, or suggestions for improvement. Afterwards, I offer an overview of the discussions. My teaching approach is tailored to meet the needs of the students I instruct. I adapt informal assessments based on students' abilities by introducing concepts in class and having them apply their learning at home. (Educator Sandra Jamison)

While there was a common goal of applying English skills, the methods and contexts varied among the students, reflecting the dynamic nature of blended learning's impact on language acquisition and daily life usage. The study's results showcase a multifaceted approach to applying English language skills acquired through blended learning courses in daily life. At home, English usage is minimal. Student Sarah noted in a focus group discussion,

I only use English when I have to present something or during class discussions. At home, we always speak in our native language.

Focused group discussions also highlighted how educators help students overcome challenges in blended learning. Educators emphasised integrating course content into daily life and providing multifaceted support to students. For instance, an educator shared during an interview,

I try to integrate real-life examples in my lessons and encourage students to practice English outside the classroom by engaging in simple conversations at home or with friends. (Educator Sandra Jamison)

This challenge is consistent with findings in the literature, which emphasise the importance of immersive and consistent language use for effective learning. Studies suggest that creating opportunities for students to use English outside of the academic environment can enhance language retention and practical usage (Hazaymeh, 2021).

In Group 1, students augment their learning through online resources like YouTube and apply acquired skills in interactions with peers and educators. Rosetta Rodrigues stressed the importance of clear explanations, and Ayla Alexandra explained that she relies on English language teaching videos. Similarly, Group 2 emphasised practical applications such as improved communication and comprehension, with examples ranging from casual conversations to discussions with peers. Only Group 3 shared diverse real-life applications, including understanding media and engaging in everyday interactions. Activities like communication and watching English movies were highlighted by Group 4. Group 5 focused on enhanced writing skills and utilised various online platforms for communication.

In the observed classrooms, educators focused on fostering cognitive presence by engaging students in critical thinking tasks related to first-impression accuracy. Through structured debates, group discussions, role-plays, and critical thinking exercises, students analysed scenarios involving first impressions, evaluated opposing viewpoints and proposed alternative approaches. These activities aimed to develop students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and

evidence-based reasoning skills, essential for academic success and societal engagement. For example, Educator Katie Austin posed challenging questions to stimulate critical thinking.

Educator Ruby Robinson's deep discussions demonstrated her experience in engaging students effectively. Educators Ruby Robinson and Sarah Smith stressed the importance of setting clear goals for online discussions that enhance critical thinking and language skills. They choose engaging topics, use open-ended questions, and encourage reflection to create dynamic learning environments.

The results of this study are consistent with those of prior studies like those of Yajie and Jumaat (2023), which have highlighted the impact of teaching and cognitive presence on first-year undergraduate university students' learning, arguing that cognitive presence is more predictive of students' perceived learning of English. Educators strive to balance language skills development and critical thinking in content selection. They choose materials that challenge students' linguistic abilities while stimulating their cognitive skills. These varied approaches reflect the educators' educational experiences and expertise, which inform their decisions in selecting content and designing instructional activities tailored to their students' needs.

### *6.3.3 Instructional Clarity and Stimulation*

Data revealed that educators at Tabuk University use instructor's design, facilitation, and interactive teaching methods to make learning more engaging and inclusive for all students. Figure 4 presents educators' teaching methods, such as inviting atmosphere, eye contact, etc. They adapt their teaching methods to support individual learning needs, create a supportive classroom environment, and provide timely feedback to engage, motivate, and help students in their language learning journeys. Adapting instructional tools and facilitating activities by educators highlight their teaching presence. They scaffold learning by providing support and utilising interactive tools to enhance engagement. Additionally, aligning lesson activities with learning objectives indicates effective instructional design and planning, enhancing teaching presence in the learning environment.

Each educator's unique teaching style reflects their style in the classroom. Informal assessments, such as observation and questioning, enable real-time assessment of student understanding, contributing to teaching presence (see Figure 5.4). Overall, the observed feedback and support methods demonstrate effective teaching presence in tracking student progress and achieving learning objectives. Below are some direct quotes from the participants.

I engage in scaffolded learning activities, breaking down complex tasks into smaller, more manageable ones for students. Additionally, I offer flexibility and support with materials and resources to facilitate faster self-regulation and metacognition, which are crucial for their learning progress and reflection on their experiences. Fortunately, we have access to a whiteboard on our laptops, which I effectively use for informal assessments in the classroom by typing questions and engaging with students as if I were standing in front of them. (Educator Ruby Robinson)

During class, I utilise various platforms, including apps like Blackboard, which offers online learning opportunities for students to engage in autonomous learning. One example is "reflections," which are integrated into the curriculum and introduced initially in the classroom. (Educator Sandra Jamison)

Using polls, especially on platforms like Blackboard or WhatsApp, has proven effective. Fun polls act as engaging icebreakers, whether at the beginning, during, or after class breaks. I usually ask simple questions like favourite ice cream flavours or opinions on recent songs or travel destinations, encouraging participation in a light-hearted manner.

Moreover, I utilise WhatsApp groups for informal communication, information sharing, and student interaction, fostering a sense of community. I employ breakout groups on Blackboard for more formal group work in smaller settings. (Educator Liz Marshall)

Overall, students see educators as effective when they promote meaningful learning and success in language acquisition. The data reported here suggest that educators' efforts to create an

intellectually stimulating classroom environment—in-person or online—make students feel more connected and engaged with their peers and the subject matter. The results support the findings of other studies like McLaughlin et al. (2015), who emphasise the benefits of active learning strategies, leading to improved academic performance. Other studies argue that visual media, such as videos, audio, and graphics, enhance blended learning significantly (Suhail et al., 2012).

Hrastinski (2019) emphasises that blended learning is not just about combining the two modes but about finding the right balance to enhance learning outcomes. Data from observations concur with him, and it shows that educators have adapted their methods to meet diverse learning needs and preferences. The educators provided various activities and resources to cater to students' learning styles. These effective practices enhanced ESL students' learning experiences and outcomes in blended learning environments.

Data also revealed that there seems to be limited flexibility with the instructional design relating to the kind of assessments and feedback. One educator stated that.

My challenge is when students have to do speaking tasks and upload their recordings. I question the authenticity of student submissions. Another type of assessment I use is quizzes, which must be completed within a specific time. Sometimes, the students cannot complete their quizzes because of technical issues or other assignments. (Educator Liz Marshall)

I am concerned about the restrictions regarding feedback. Management has instructed educators not to provide individual feedback; collective feedback is preferred. As an educator, I can mention things like "most students have done this" and "a few students have done that." Unfortunately, there is no individualised feedback available for students.

(Educator Sandra Jamison)

Giving feedback on language skills in online discussions and assignments involves careful planning and using various methods. I use rubrics the university provides to clarify and outline language proficiency criteria for discussions and assignments. These help students understand expectations and ensure consistent accuracy, vocabulary, critical thinking, and collaboration feedback. (Educator Sarah Smith)

In summary, instructional design and planning are integral to the educational experience, significantly influencing the COI framework's teaching presence. The thoughtful design of lessons and activities supports the achievement of learning objectives and fosters a rich, interactive, and supportive learning environment. However, speaking assessment and individual feedback are challenges that must be considered as these are critical aspects of language acquisition and contribute to the student's cognitive development.

#### *6.3.4 Technical and Emotional Support*

It was evident from the data that creating a conducive learning climate and support is crucial for ESL educators to enhance teaching effectiveness. Creating an inclusive and supportive atmosphere in blended learning for female students at Tabuk University involved addressing individual, cultural, and technical needs and academic responsibilities. In the observed classrooms, the educators prioritised creating environments characterised by trust, emotional safety, and support. For example, one participant explained:

I established a serene and relaxed atmosphere where students felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions during discussions. This created a safe space for students to express themselves without fear of judgment. (Educator Liz Marshall).

Overall, the educators in the observed classrooms nurtured social and emotional skills by creating inclusive and supportive environments. In Educator Sarah Smith's class, students collaborated effectively with peers and the educator, demonstrating trust and rapport while seeking assistance

or guidance. This confidence and connection fostered a supportive learning environment where students felt comfortable taking risks and exploring new ideas.

The above data confirm that blended learning enhances the effectiveness of differentiated instruction by allowing educators to tailor instruction to individual student needs and preferences, fostering a supportive learning environment where all students feel valued and challenged. The conclusion is that ESL educators employ effective practices in blended learning, leverage technology to deliver dynamic and interactive lessons, tailor instruction to meet diverse student needs and support student progress.

The above is supported by Bonk and Graham (2012), who emphasise motivation and engagement in blended learning, while students declare educators' support in addressing weaknesses as ensuring an interactive learning environment. Meanwhile, Kirby and Thomas (2022) argue that flexible learning environments enhance language proficiency and academic performance. They concur that creating inclusive classrooms where students feel valued is essential for language acquisition and success. These environments cultivate mutual respect, contributing to effective English language teaching and learning and empowering ESL students to excel confidently. These practices are rooted in the COI framework, which enhances students' confidence and emotional well-being, enabling them to reach their full potential.

Across focus groups, students consistently highlighted the indispensable role of educators in navigating challenges in blended learning environments, particularly language barriers and technical issues. Students appreciate personalised language support, clear instructions, and technical assistance from educators. For example,

Educators' tailored assistance's role is to aid comprehension and boost confidence. Educators help them in online chats, making students more interested, motivated, and engaged. (Focus Group 1)

Educators give clear explanations, use visuals, and are patient in helping us (students) with technical issues, making learning more accessible. They also encourage us (students) to engage with online resources and provide support by breaking down homework problems and assisting with technology-related challenges. (Focus Group 3)

The sentiment from all the focus groups is that flexible learning opportunities allow (students) to access resources and practice language skills at their own pace and convenience. ESL students perceive blended learning as beneficial for enhancing their language skills, appreciating flexibility, and integrating multimedia resources. This consistent support underscores educators' dedication to creating a positive learning atmosphere and helping students succeed in blended learning, including sharing data with them.

Students often lack data for online activities. I share my data for limited periods before, during, and after class, and they can schedule extra usage during office hours. If they require additional use of my data, they can schedule that with me during my office hours. This promotes student participation and assists with learning even with limited resources. (Educator Sarah Smith)

Similar to Smith, another educator stated:

I share my data with students, promoting participation and supporting learning. (Educator Sandra Jamison)

Research by McKerlich et al. (2011) emphasises the importance of social presence in building a supportive learning community, further enhanced by collaborative peer and group learning. Educators employ various techniques to engage ESL students at Tabuk University. Educators strive to create inclusive and supportive learning environments by leveraging online platforms, fostering social presence, and addressing technological challenges. They cultivate an atmosphere conducive to language acquisition and student success by promoting active participation, motivation, and collaboration.

### *6.3.5 Language and Independence Support*

The data from previous sections indicated that students and educators positively view blended learning for language acquisition due to its enhanced engagement and flexibility. The following is a quote from one of the educators.

I utilise various platforms, including apps like Blackboard, which offers online learning opportunities for students to engage in autonomous learning. Another style I use is "reflections," which are integrated into the curriculum and introduced initially in the classroom. I use group work, with stronger students often supporting peers who may need assistance or are less confident participating. I also facilitate small group interactions to promote speaking skills, particularly for students who may be shy or hesitant to engage vocally. (Educator Sandra Jamison)

Using an app, students upload their work within a set timeframe, allowing for autonomous learning outside class. The app provides online resources like listening activities, games, and reading materials. I incorporate interactive games during class to enhance engagement and introduce online learning. Blackboard is integrated into the online syllabus, providing access to course materials aligned with the textbook, including listening assessments, tests, and ongoing assessments, supporting students' learning needs throughout the course. (Educator Sandra Jamison)

Surprisingly, Educator Katie Austin's minimal online interaction, primarily focused on grading and attendance, did not pose challenges in maintaining student engagement. This supports a study by Suhail et al. (2012), which underscores the role of self-regulation and peer support in knowledge construction facilitated by effective technology and interaction.

Even though Kate minimally engages with her students online in class, she emphasises empathy, kindness, and respect towards peers, fostering a supportive environment where students

collaborate effectively and feel valued. This promoted student feeling valued, respected, and motivated to participate actively in their learning journey. This encouraged collaboration and the exchange of ideas among students, contributing to a vibrant learning environment. This enthusiasm contributed to a positive classroom climate and enhanced the learning experience.

However, several issues have been identified, including technological barriers, cultural issues, and language transferability. In particular, the study found that cultural norms and practices can influence students' participation in online assessments. For example, some female students face restrictions due to religious beliefs, which can affect their engagement in online activities. Dana Ahmad from Group 3 mentioned, "I live in an extended family where privacy is limited, making it difficult to participate in online assessments effectively."

ESL students face challenges adapting to cultural norms in online learning environments. For example, educators find it challenging to identify female students wearing niqabs, thus impacting engagement. (A niqab is a veil Muslim woman wear that covers the hair and face, leaving only the eyes visible).

Blended learning may not fully accommodate cultural differences. These issues impact language learning and the promotion of independence support. An educator shared that,

Understanding and respecting cultural differences is critical. We must ensure that our teaching methods and materials are inclusive and considerate of all students' backgrounds. (Educator Sarah Smith)

During the face-to-face interviews, one educator mentioned that:

I allow students to discuss projects and assignments, being mindful to avoid discussing sensitive topics such as religious activities, especially given our location in Saudi Arabia. (Educator Ruby Robinson)

Studies have shown that cultural differences can impact student engagement, teaching presence and student success in blended learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Addressing these cultural barriers by incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices and creating an inclusive learning environment is crucial for the success of blended learning initiatives (Vaughan, 2010).

Blended learning necessitates proficiency in online tools for both educators and students. However, data show frequent issues with specific programmes and connectivity. Educators reported significant challenges, for example:

Technology is a significant challenge, especially in managing large classes and group activities. Limited internet access, particularly in remote areas, complicates assignment completion. The university does not provide data, and personal data usage is often impractical. Dead zones within the building hinder internet access. Improving network accessibility and providing data or on-campus computer labs for assignments is recommended. (Educator Liz Marshall)

Technological challenges like device compatibility and platform glitches disrupt learning for ESL students. I use alternative communication channels like WhatsApp and incorporate interactive activities to engage students. (Educator Ruby Robinson)

During classroom observations, it was noted that many students struggled with connecting to online platforms due to poor internet connections. Kadi Abdullah remarked, "Sometimes I can't even join the online class because the internet is so bad where I live. It makes it hard to keep up with my studies."

The data indicated that technological challenges and digital literacy issues can hinder cognitive presence by disrupting students' ability to engage deeply with the content. Addressing these barriers is critical for fostering meaningful learning experiences.

The lack of access to necessary technology and varying levels of digital literacy exacerbates these challenges, widening the achievement gap. Enhancing students' digital literacy is crucial for blended learning success.

Despite significant challenges, the benefits of blended learning at Tabuk University outweigh the obstacles. By leveraging technology and fostering a culturally inclusive environment, educators can create rewarding learning experiences for all students. Overcoming the challenges of blended learning requires a combination of technological support, cultural understanding, and ongoing educator training.

Garrison et al. (2010) emphasise the importance of teaching, social, and cognitive presence in fostering active learning through interaction and collaboration, aligning with this study's findings. The COI framework enhances blended learning by structuring interaction, critical thinking, and instructional design. Despite its advantages, applying the COI framework can be challenging due to technology limitations and cultural differences, particularly in non-Western contexts like Tabuk University. Nonetheless, it remains a valuable tool for improving ESL teaching practices by fostering collaboration and deep learning. The following section will discuss the challenges Tabuk University students and educators identified in this study.

#### **6.4 Assessment and Feedback**

Another challenge is the assessment and feedback. Blended learning for ESL instruction involves evaluating students' progress through online and face-to-face methods. This hybrid approach allows educators to monitor students' performance continually and provide timely feedback, which is crucial for language acquisition. The findings from the study reveal both the benefits and challenges associated with assessment in blended learning environments.

Using blended learning in ESL instruction offers several benefits that align with the literature on this topic. For instance, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) emphasise the importance of leveraging digital technologies to provide timely feedback and track students' progress effectively. The data from interviews and classroom observations support these claims.

In Group 1, Rosetta Rodrigues highlighted that blended learning platforms like Blackboard allow for regular quizzes and assignments that help track students' understanding in real time. "The immediate feedback from online quizzes helps me understand my mistakes and learn faster," she noted. This sentiment was echoed by Gaia Drakes, who appreciated the accessibility of online resources for self-assessment and improvement. "I can review my quiz results anytime and understand where I need to improve," she said.

Despite the benefits, the study also identified several challenges in implementing effective assessment strategies in blended learning environments. One significant issue is the technological barriers that both educators and students face. Al-Juda (2017) states limited access to reliable internet and technological tools can hinder assessment. This challenge was confirmed by Liz Marshall, an educator, who mentioned, "Technology is a significant challenge for me, particularly in managing large classes and overseeing group activities. Limited internet access makes completing assignments difficult."

My challenge is when students have to do speaking tasks and upload their recordings. I question the authenticity of student submissions. I find that there are limitations to the kind of speaking assessments one can do online, but I am successful with reading, writing, and listening online assessment (Educator Liz Marshall)

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the variability in digital literacy among students poses another challenge. Vaughan (2010) highlights that uneven digital skills can affect the fairness and effectiveness of assessments. In Group 3, Adira Mohammad pointed out, "Not all students are comfortable using online platforms for assessments, which can affect their performance."

The findings highlight educators' need for continuous professional development to improve their digital literacy and pedagogical skills in blended learning environments. Institutional support, such as training and resources, is essential for effective teaching presence. One educator mentioned,

We need more training on how to use these digital tools effectively. It's not just about knowing the tools but how to integrate them into our teaching methods. (Educator Katie Austin)

The findings further emphasise that implementing blended learning requires institutional support, including faculty training and technology investment. These challenges are well documented, with studies highlighting the importance of providing adequate technological support and training to students and educators to maximise the effectiveness of blended learning (Bryman, 2016; Vaughan, 2010). Vaughan's (2010) assumptions about students' digital literacy may not hold for all populations, potentially hindering the effectiveness of blended learning if not adequately addressed. Ensuring device compatibility, offering alternative communication channels, and maintaining digital tools are essential when addressing technological and logistical challenges.

The study suggests several strategies to address these challenges. First, improving technological infrastructure and providing adequate training for both educators and students is crucial. As Graham (2018) suggests, investing in robust digital tools and ensuring device compatibility can enhance the assessment process. Ruby Robinson, an educator, recommended, "Providing data or establishing on-campus computer labs for assignment work can mitigate some of the technological barriers."

Moreover, diverse assessment methods can cater to different learning styles and cultural backgrounds. Sarah Smith, an educator, shared, "Using a mix of online and face-to-face

assessments can help accommodate students' diverse needs and ensure a fair evaluation of their skills."

The assessment in blended learning for ESL instruction offers significant benefits, such as immediate feedback and personalised learning experiences. However, challenges related to technology, digital literacy, and cultural barriers must be addressed to realise these benefits fully. By improving technological infrastructure, providing comprehensive training, and adopting diverse assessment methods, educators can enhance the effectiveness of blended learning and support students' language acquisition more effectively.

## **6.5 Chapter Summary**

In conclusion, this study has comprehensively analysed blended learning practices in ESL teaching at Tabuk University. The findings reveal that educators increasingly integrate online and face-to-face instructional methods to create more flexible and engaging learning environments. These practices have enhanced student participation and facilitated personalised learning experiences catering to diverse student needs.

The chapter highlighted several benefits of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction. The main advantages include increased accessibility to learning resources, improved student engagement, and the ability to tailor instruction to individual learning styles. However, the study also identified significant challenges, such as technological barriers, the need for educators to develop professionally, and potential resistance from students who may prefer traditional classroom settings. Despite these challenges, the observed positive effects on language proficiency and student satisfaction emphasise the potential of blended learning as an invaluable educational method in higher education.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

This study aimed to unpack blended learning in higher education. In this final chapter, I embark on a comprehensive examination of the implications derived from the insightful findings presented in preceding chapters. I aim to illuminate this research endeavour's practical significance and scholarly contributions by synthesising the rich tapestry of data and analysis. As I navigate the implications of the findings, I offer actionable recommendations for practitioners, faculty heads, and researchers seeking to enhance the efficacy and inclusivity of blended learning approaches in ESL education. Moreover, I underscore the broader implications of my study for advancing pedagogical practices, fostering student engagement, and nurturing inclusive learning environments.

#### **7.2 Reviewing the Focus of the Study**

The focus of the study was to investigate the implementation of blended learning in ESL instruction at Tabuk University, with a particular emphasis on exploring its benefits, challenges, and overall effectiveness in enhancing language learning outcomes. The study examined how ESL educators integrate blended learning into their teaching practices, students' perceptions regarding its efficacy, and the impact of blended learning on language acquisition. My research also sought to explore the benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction. Additionally, the study sought to identify the various challenges educators and students face in implementing blended learning, including technological barriers, cultural considerations, and limitations in English language usage outside the classroom setting. Through qualitative data generation methods such as interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions, the study aimed to provide insights into best practices for integrating blended learning in ESL instruction and recommendations for improving the effectiveness of blended learning initiatives at Tabuk University.

I observed five instructional sessions, concentrating on content delivery, student engagement, and the observable actions of both students and educators. Additionally, I interviewed five ESL educators employed at Tabuk University, all of whom were native English speakers, comprising two individuals from America, two from South Africa, and one from the UK. During the interviews, I employed predetermined open-ended questions to elicit their perspectives on blended learning while paying close attention to their verbal and non-verbal responses. Furthermore, I organised five focus groups, each consisting of five undergraduate students who were Arabic speakers, resulting in 25 participants, to delve deeper into their experiences and perceptions.

### **7.3 Summary of Findings**

The findings are summarised concerning the three research questions below.

1. How do ESL educators incorporate blended learning in their teaching practices?
2. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction?
3. How do ESL students perceive the effectiveness and impact of blended learning on their language learning outcomes?

This study found that blended learning facilitates a higher level of cognitive presence. Garrison et al. (2001) are well-known for their work on cognitive presence within the COI framework. They were the COI framework's primary developers and have extensively explored the concept of cognitive presence in online and blended learning environments (Garrison et al., 2001). Cognitive presence significantly impacts students' learning in blended programmes by fostering critical thinking, deep understanding, and meaningful learning experiences. In a university setting, cognitive presence encourages students to engage in reflective and sustained discourse, allowing them to construct and confirm meaning through communication and interaction with their peers and instructors. Garrison et al. (2001) also describe cognitive presence as the extent to which students can construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. In blended learning environments, this is achieved through a mix of online and face-to-face activities

that promote inquiry, analysis, and application of knowledge. Cognitive presence helps students develop higher-order thinking skills crucial for academic success and personal growth.

At Tabuk University, female students shared their perspectives on the presence of cognitive presence in both online and face-to-face classes in focus groups. They also discussed how their educators strive to establish a cognitive presence in these learning environments. On the other hand, the educators shared the methods, techniques, and challenges they face in implementing cognitive presence, which is relevant to the COI framework and effective learning. Through student focus groups and educator interviews, this research explored how ESL educators incorporate blended learning into their teaching practices for university students. This study aimed to understand educators' methods and strategies, focusing on how they achieve cognitive presence. It also examined how these approaches impact student engagement and learning outcomes.

This study's second finding is that interactive teaching methods foster positive teaching presence. In blended learning, teaching presence is critical in creating a supportive and engaging learning environment. Instructors can bridge the gap between online and face-to-face components by effectively planning to learn activities, delivering direct instruction, and fostering meaningful interactions. This present research explored how educators incorporate blended learning into their teaching practices. This helps maintain continuity, provides guidance, and promotes active participation, enhancing student engagement, deeper understanding, and meaningful learning interactions. The importance of interactive teaching methods is supported by Van der Stap et al. (2024), who advocated for good course design in blended learning.

In the focus groups, Tabuk University students shared their experiences and perceptions on how teaching presence contributes to their learning in blended learning classes. They discussed how educators' guidance and support help them understand course content better, achieve learning objectives, and engage more actively in their learning process. Additionally, students described the various opportunities educators create to incorporate teaching presence in blended learning environments. They highlighted specific instances where instructors design engaging learning

activities, provide clear instructions, deliver effective direct instruction, and facilitate meaningful interactions to enhance learning experiences. Through these discussions, students provided insights into the significance of teaching presence and its impact on their learning outcomes in blended learning classes.

In interviews, educators discussed using interactive lessons and discussions to engage students. They also explained how they give feedback to help students grasp topics better through discussions. Educators use activities and group work in traditional classes to keep students interested. They explain things clearly, answer questions, and prompt critical thinking. In summary, educators discussed creating a solid teaching presence by making learning enjoyable and interactive, providing support, and promoting interactions to aid student learning in both online and traditional settings.

This research sought to delve deeper into the student perspective on social presence in blended learning classes through focus groups. By engaging students in discussions about their experiences, the research aimed to understand how educators facilitate a sense of belonging and encourage interaction among students in blended learning classes. I hoped to gain valuable insights into the strategies for effective social presence by asking students about specific examples and techniques their educators use. These discussions explored various topics related to social presence, providing a comprehensive understanding of its role in promoting engagement and collaboration among students in blended ESL courses. The findings show a solid social presence to enhance student engagement. However, the challenges discussed in the previous section must be noted as they harm student autonomy.

The study also identified significant challenges, such as technological barriers, the need for educators to develop professionally and adapt to cultural norms, and challenges with assessment and feedback. These challenges have potential resistance from students and educators who may prefer traditional classroom settings. Despite these challenges, the observed positive effects on language proficiency and student satisfaction emphasise the potential of blended learning as an invaluable educational method in higher education. In conclusion, the COI framework helps us

understand how teaching, thinking, and socialising work together in learning. It shows how important it is for educators and students to connect well during online and traditional classes.

Thus, selecting the COI framework proved beneficial for this research study.

### *7.3.1 Research Question 1*

*How do ESL educators incorporate blended learning into their teaching practices?*

ESL educators incorporate blended learning into their teaching practices by integrating interactive discussions, differentiated instruction, and technology to enhance students' educational experiences. They employ SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) objectives to ensure clarity and focus on the educational process. By aligning the curriculum with learning outcomes and employing active learning strategies, educators deliver dynamic and interactive lessons that cater to diverse student needs. They utilise multimedia elements like videos and online quizzes to create engaging content and provide flexible learning opportunities, enabling students to access resources and practise language skills independently. Additionally, educators tailor teaching methods and materials to meet students' diverse preferences and interests, fostering a positive learning environment. However, challenges such as lack of training and technology and issues with assessment must be addressed for the full implementation of blended learning.

### *7.3.2 Research Question 2*

*What are the perceived benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction?*

Implementing blended learning in ESL instruction offers numerous benefits that are aligned with the research objective of exploring its advantages. From enhanced flexibility and accessibility to personalised learning experiences, integrating multimodal learning resources, and collaborative learning opportunities, blended learning can transform language learning experiences for ESL students. By leveraging digital technologies and adopting innovative instructional approaches, educators can harness the benefits of blended learning to enhance language learning outcomes and promote student success in ESL education. Blended learning simplifies ESL classes for educators and students by allowing digital tools like videos, quizzes, and online chats to be

accessible anytime and anywhere. This flexibility enables students to learn at their own pace and in their preferred style, while educators can adjust their lessons to meet the diverse needs of ESL students.

One significant benefit is the ability of educators to offer personalised lessons tailored to each student's needs, using online platforms and specialised software to match lessons to individual levels, styles, and interests. This personalised approach helps keep students engaged and motivated, improving their learning outcomes. Additionally, integrating multimodal learning resources, such as videos, audio recordings, interactive simulations, and virtual reality applications, enhances the learning experience and caters to diverse learning preferences, making it easier for ESL students to grasp language concepts.

However, challenges such as lack of training, technological issues, and time constraints must be addressed to implement blended learning fully. Educators often face difficulties managing time and effectively integrating technology into their teaching practices. To fully realise the benefits of blended learning, it is essential to provide educators with adequate training and support to navigate these challenges. Despite these obstacles, the overall potential of blended learning to enhance ESL instruction and improve educational experiences for students is significant.

### *7.3.3 Research Question 3*

*How do ESL students perceive the effectiveness and impact of blended learning on their language learning outcomes?*

ESL students generally perceive blended learning as highly effective and beneficial for their language learning outcomes. Flexible learning opportunities allow them to access resources and practise language skills at their own pace and convenience, catering to individual learning styles and schedules. Students appreciate the engaging content provided through multimedia elements, which enhances their comprehension and motivation. Technology in blended learning also facilitates collaborative learning, promoting cultural sensitivity and encouraging students to engage in online discussions that improve critical thinking and language skills. Overall, effective practices in blended learning, such as providing constructive feedback and focusing on clear

goals and objectives, support student progress and create a favourable climate for language acquisition.

One of the significant challenges identified by students from diverse cultural backgrounds is adapting to the norms and expectations of online learning environments. For instance, female students wearing niqabs find it challenging to participate in video-based activities due to cultural and religious restrictions and their limited use of English outside the classroom. Another challenge is using English in academic settings, such as for tests, presentations, and class discussions, while rarely using it in casual or everyday conversations. This limitation can hinder their language proficiency and confidence in real-world scenarios. The current study's findings largely corroborate the benefits outlined in Garrison et al.'s (2010) framework, particularly regarding enhanced interaction and engagement through technological tools. Students and educators alike highlighted the flexibility and accessibility of blended learning, which allows for a more tailored and dynamic educational experience. For instance, multimedia resources such as videos, online quizzes, and interactive simulations enhanced students' understanding and retention of language concepts.

However, empirical data also revealed several challenges that complicate the idealised implementation of the COI framework. Notably, issues related to technological infrastructure, digital literacy, and cultural barriers surfaced as significant impediments. For example, limited internet access, particularly in remote areas, hinders students' ability to participate fully in blended learning environments. As Liz Marshall, an educator, pointed out: "Limited internet access, especially for students in remote areas, makes completing assignments difficult." This issue contradicts the assumption within the COI framework that technology uniformly enhances educational access and engagement.

The findings suggest that students and educators often lack adequate training to utilise blended learning tools effectively. This gap in digital literacy can lead to a suboptimal educational experience, where technology becomes more of a barrier than a facilitator. Ruby Robinson, another educator, noted: "Technology challenges, such as device compatibility and platform glitches, can disrupt learning for ESL students at the university." This highlights a crucial

oversight in Garrison et al.'s (2010) framework, which underestimates the importance of continuous professional development and support for educators in navigating technological tools.

Cultural considerations further complicate the seamless integration of technology as envisioned by the COI framework. For ESL students, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds, technology in education must be sensitive to cultural norms and values. The study found that cultural barriers, such as language transferability issues and varying degrees of familiarity with digital tools, can impede the effectiveness of blended learning. For instance, some students expressed difficulties adapting to their courses' technological aspects due to limited exposure to such tools in their previous educational experiences.

#### **7.4 Research Conclusions**

This study yielded several significant conclusions. Regarding the implementation of blended learning by ESL educators, the research reveals that educators have successfully adopted a comprehensive approach combining interactive discussions, differentiated instruction, and technology integration. They effectively utilise SMART objectives while incorporating multimedia resources and flexible learning opportunities. This implementation is characterised by personalised teaching methods carefully tailored to meet diverse student needs. However, the effectiveness of this implementation is fundamentally dependent upon addressing systemic challenges, including the need for robust technological infrastructure, ongoing professional development opportunities, and thoughtful cultural adaptation considerations.

The study conclusively demonstrates that blended learning in ESL instruction offers substantial benefits while presenting notable challenges. The benefits manifest through enhanced flexibility and accessibility in learning, improved opportunities for personalised learning experiences, and successful integration of multimodal learning resources. The approach facilitates increased collaborative learning opportunities and student engagement through digital tools. Nevertheless, several critical challenges require attention, including technological barriers, infrastructure limitations, and comprehensive educator training. Time management constraints, cultural

adaptation requirements, and complications in assessment and feedback processes also emerge as significant hurdles that institutions must address for successful implementation.

Regarding student perceptions and learning outcomes, the research concludes that students generally view blended learning positively, particularly appreciating the flexibility in accessing learning resources and the opportunity for self-paced learning. They respond favourably to engagement with multimedia content and value enhanced collaborative learning experiences. However, cultural and practical limitations significantly impact learning outcomes. Cultural norms, such as those affecting female students wearing niqabs in video-based activities, create participation barriers. Additionally, limited English usage outside academic settings affects real-world language applications, while technological accessibility issues influence overall learning engagement.

The research offers essential conclusions regarding the implications of the theoretical framework. While the COI framework is valuable in understanding the interplay between teaching, cognitive, and social presence, it requires adaptation to serve diverse educational contexts better. The framework needs modification to better account for cultural considerations in technology integration, institutional support requirements, digital literacy development, and infrastructure prerequisites. This study concludes that a more contextualised approach to blended learning implementation is necessary, carefully considering local technological infrastructure, cultural norms and expectations, student and educator digital competencies, and institutional support systems.

These findings lead to the overarching conclusion that while blended learning presents significant potential for ESL education, its successful implementation demands careful consideration of technological, cultural, and pedagogical factors. The research demonstrates that the effectiveness of blended learning in ESL education can be enhanced through a more nuanced and context-aware approach to implementation, one that acknowledges and addresses both the opportunities and challenges identified in this study. This conclusion emphasises the importance of developing

comprehensive support systems and adaptive strategies to maximise the benefits of blended learning while minimising potential barriers to success.

### **7.5 Comments on COI Framework**

While the COI framework provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the interplay of cognitive, social, and teaching presences in a technology-enhanced learning environment, it may overstate the universality and ease of technology integration. The empirical evidence from this study suggests that the practical implementation of blended learning requires more nuanced considerations, particularly around technological infrastructure, digital literacy, and cultural adaptability.

Moreover, the COI framework might benefit from a more explicit emphasis on institutional support, including adequate funding for technological resources, ongoing training for educators, and strategies to address student digital inequities. The focus on institutional support would align the theoretical model more closely with the realities observed in diverse educational settings, as highlighted by the study's participants.

In conclusion, while Garrison's COI framework remains valuable for conceptualising blended learning environments, it necessitates a more grounded approach considering the practical challenges this study identified. By addressing the gaps in technological infrastructure, enhancing digital literacy, and being mindful of cultural barriers, educational institutions can better leverage technology to foster effective and inclusive learning communities. This critique underscores the importance of adapting theoretical models to reflect modern educational landscapes' complexities and contextual realities.

### **7.6 Limitations of the Study**

This study explored the benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction and acknowledges several limitations that may impact the generalisability and

applicability of its findings. One limitation is that the study was qualitative, meaning the data collected relied on self-reported data from students and educators, which could be biased. Although the three data generation techniques (observation checklist, interview questions for educators, and focus group discussion) provided triangulation, the findings cannot be generalised.

The study's sample size is another limitation. Only 25 students, five educators, and five classes were selected for the study, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the study's participants consisted exclusively of female students from Saudi Arabia, thus limiting the diversity of the sample. The data generation was limited to Tabuk University and may not reflect the full diversity of the population under study. This limitation might introduce bias and affect the applicability of the results to other contexts.

The language barrier significantly impacted this qualitative study, particularly evident in the focus group, where participants may have lacked fluency in English, leading to potential misunderstandings and inaccuracies in their responses. Despite efforts to translate students' thoughts and feelings using Google Translate, the depth and richness of the data may have been compromised.

This study faced several limitations, but it offers valuable insights into blended learning in ESL education. Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for understanding the scope and applicability of the findings. Future research can address these limitations by using more significant samples, extending the study duration to long-term effects, and using better tools for data analysis. By addressing these shortcomings, researchers can build upon the foundation laid by this study and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of blended learning's effectiveness in ESL education. Ultimately, this ongoing exploration will further enrich the field and inform practical applications in educational settings.

## **7.7 Recommendations**

Based on the findings and insights gathered through the study on blended learning in ESL instruction, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness and maximise the potential of blended learning in ESL education.

#### *7.7.1 Training and Digital Literacy*

Educators and students may need extra training to use blended learning effectively. Enhancing digital literacy is crucial, and Tabuk University should offer programmes like introductory courses on digital tools to boost students' skills. More workshops and training on technology, including Blackboard, are needed for both students and educators. Support for educators in using technology effectively is also essential. Institutions should address technological challenges by ensuring device compatibility, providing alternative communication channels, and having contingency plans for technical disruptions. Regular updates and maintenance of digital tools are vital for smooth blended learning operations.

#### *7.7.2 Technological Infrastructure*

Tabuk University must invest in a robust technological infrastructure, such as reliable internet, updated hardware, and high-quality digital tools. Ensuring access to necessary technology will reduce disparities and enhance the learning experience. Establishing technical support systems for troubleshooting and maintenance is also essential.

#### *7.7.3 Professional Development*

Continuous professional development is crucial for the success of blended learning. Training programmes in digital literacy, instructional design, and technology integration can empower educators. Workshops, webinars, and collaborative learning communities offer ongoing support and opportunities to share best practices. Training educators in gender-sensitive teaching approaches can address female students' unique challenges.

To optimise blended learning, it is essential to provide comprehensive training and support for educators and students, enhance digital literacy, and address technological challenges. Encouraging the use of English in casual settings, designing student-centred activities, and fostering inclusive environments will promote engagement and participation. Clear guidelines, regular feedback, and diverse, relatable curriculum content are vital for student success. These recommendations allow higher educational institutions, like Tabuk University, to create a more effective and equitable blended learning experience.

## **7.8 Recommendations for Further Research**

In considering avenues for future exploration, the following recommendations emerge, focusing specifically on advancing research within the assessment domain in blended learning for ESL education.

1. Conducting comparative studies to evaluate the effectiveness of different assessment methods in blended learning environments for ESL students. By comparing traditional exams, project-based assessments, peer assessments, and other techniques, researchers can gain insights into which approaches are most suitable for assessing ESL students' language proficiency and overall learning outcomes in blended learning settings.
2. Longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of blended learning on ESL students' language proficiency and academic performance. By tracking students' progress over an extended period, researchers can determine the sustained effects of blended learning interventions on ESL students' language development and academic achievement.
3. Further investigation is warranted into the effectiveness of specific training programmes or professional development initiatives for ESL educators focusing on assessment practices in blended learning environments. Understanding how training programmes can support educators in designing and implementing effective assessment strategies tailored to the

unique needs of ESL students can contribute to improved teaching practices in blended learning settings.

4. Research exploring ESL students' perspectives on various assessment methods used in blended learning can provide valuable insights. Investigating students' preferences, perceptions of fairness, and perceived impact on learning can help identify assessment approaches that are engaging, motivating, and effective for ESL students in blended learning environments.
5. Finally, future research could explore integrating emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and learning analytics, in assessment practices within blended learning contexts for ESL education. Investigating how these technological innovations can enhance the efficiency, accuracy, and fairness of assessment in blended learning settings can inform the development of innovative assessment strategies that better meet the needs of ESL students.

These suggestions provide a foundation for future studies to delve into critical aspects of assessment design, implementation, and evaluation, ultimately enriching our understanding of how assessment can be optimally integrated into blended learning contexts to support ESL students' needs. Through the identified gaps and exploring these areas in depth, researchers may contribute to enhancing assessment practices, thereby fostering more effective language learning outcomes in blended learning environments.

### **7.9 Reflections on Undertaking this Study**

As an educator teaching ESL with a blended learning approach at Tabuk University, this experience has provided insights into ESL education's teaching and learning dynamics. I have gained valuable perspectives on how educators design and facilitate online discussions, employing strategies that foster critical thinking and language development. I have also learned about the impact of blended learning on student's critical thinking skills in English language

learning, the effectiveness of online discussion facilitation, the application of English language skills in daily life, and the support needed for overcoming challenges like language barriers or technology issues in blended learning environments. I have also learned that discussions utilising open-ended questions encourage deep reflection and critical thinking among ESL students, aiding them in expressing their thoughts clearly.

Multi-media resources and real-world examples enrich vocabulary and perspectives, which are vital in blended learning. Techniques such as scaffolding discussions with sentence starters and relevant vocabulary support students in engaging effectively with the content. Moreover, promoting active listening and fostering respectful interactions among students and educators cultivates a collaborative ESL learning environment. Integrating these methods empowers ESL students to critically engage, express themselves confidently, and enhance their language proficiency through meaningful online interactions. Group work also plays a pivotal role as it allows students to develop leadership skills and boosts confidence, with peers supporting and encouraging each other. This approach underscores the importance of student collaboration in showcasing individual talents and strengths, whether in language proficiency, artistic abilities, organisational skills, or leadership qualities.

Getting the gatekeeper's permission was also very challenging. The university authorities were unfamiliar with the process, and the language barrier was an added issue as the letter was written in English. I had to request a colleague who was proficient in both English and Arabic to translate the letter. This whole process took longer than expected.

The focus group discussions further revealed that students enjoy group activities, regardless of their literacy level, effectively leveraging diverse talents to achieve collective learning goals. I discovered that students feel they do not get many chances to use English socially in real-life situations and want more opportunities to practise and apply their language skills. These exclusively female students speak highly of their educators, having positive things to say about them. However, misunderstandings can occur, especially when students lack proficiency in English.

I found that conducting class observations posed some challenges. The female educators were often occupied when I was available. One educator was hesitant to allow me to observe her lesson but agreed to participate in an interview. However, a network issue occurred in the latter part of her interview, and she exercised her right not to continue answering all the interview questions. Interviews were time-consuming, and technical issues required me to redo part of one interview due to recording problems and network connectivity.

Fewer student and educator participants initially responded than expected because educators were busy with exams and teaching. It was hard to schedule focus groups because students had conflicting commitments. Some students hesitated to speak English because they lacked confidence, but they felt more comfortable later in a supportive environment. Also, I sometimes had work conflicts with class sessions, making it challenging to observe classes regularly.

## **7.10 Chapter Summary**

This thesis thoroughly examines the benefits and challenges of implementing blended learning in ESL instruction at Tabuk University. Through classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups, the research highlights how educators integrate blended learning into their teaching practices and explores students' perceptions of this educational approach. The findings reveal that blended learning can significantly enhance language acquisition by promoting engagement, collaboration, and the practical application of English skills. However, the study also identifies crucial challenges, such as the need for a robust technological infrastructure, continuous professional development for educators, and clear guidelines to maximise the effectiveness of blended learning. Addressing these obstacles with targeted training, support, and resources is essential for ensuring educators and students fully benefit from blended learning environments. Ultimately, this approach can lead to more effective and inclusive ESL education, fostering greater student engagement within the educational landscape.

The study highlights that ESL educators enhance student learning by integrating interactive discussions, technology, and differentiated instruction. They create engaging lessons tailored to

students' needs using SMART objectives and multimedia tools. While students generally find blended learning effective due to its flexibility and personalised approach, several challenges—including insufficient training, limited access to technology, and cultural barriers—hinder its full potential. The Community of Inquiry (COI) framework is discussed as a valuable lens for viewing cognitive, social, and teaching presences in blended learning; however, it may oversimplify the role of technology, necessitating a more nuanced approach that considers factors such as technological infrastructure, digital literacy, and institutional support.

This thesis also acknowledges several limitations that impact the generalizability of the study's findings, including small sample size, reliance on self-reported data, and a lack of participant diversity, with language barriers potentially affecting discussion accuracy. Despite these limitations, the research offers valuable insights, suggesting that future studies with more extensive and diverse samples could enhance understanding of blended learning's effectiveness in ESL education. The study strongly recommends prioritizing enhanced training, digital literacy, and technological infrastructure to improve blended learning. It stresses the importance of providing additional training for educators and students on digital tools and investments from Tabuk University in reliable internet access and updated hardware. Continuous professional development in digital literacy and gender-sensitive teaching and the creation of inclusive environments that promote casual English use are also emphasised to enhance engagement and learning outcomes for ESL students.

Finally, the chapter suggests future research to improve assessment practices within blended learning frameworks for ESL education. This includes conducting comparative studies on different assessment methods and exploring their long-term effects on language proficiency. Additionally, it encourages further investigation into training programs for ESL educators and students' perspectives on assessment fairness while advocating for integrating emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and learning analytics to enhance assessment accuracy.

Reflections from the study highlight the significance of effective online discussions in fostering critical thinking and language development, as well as the necessity for support to address challenges such as language barriers and technological issues. Strategies like open-ended questions and scaffolding discussions are identified as beneficial for boosting student engagement.

The dissertation also discusses the complexities of implementing blended learning, including challenges in obtaining necessary permissions, logistical issues with scheduling, and technical problems during data collection. Despite initial low participation rates, students strongly desired more opportunities to practice English socially, indicating a need for greater engagement in real-life language use. The research concludes that with adequate support, the challenges of blended learning can be addressed, maximising its benefits for a more effective and inclusive ESL education.

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### **APPENDIX 1 - Observation Checklist**

<b>Observation Checklist</b>	
	<b>1. Social Presence</b>
	Verbal interactions and nonverbal cues among participants
	Quality of social interactions (e.g., supportive, respectful, inclusive)
	Level of social rapport and engagement among participants
	<b>2. Cognitive Presence</b>
	Evidence of Critical Thinking and Reflection in Discussions
	Demonstrations of problem-solving skills and decision-making
	Use of evidence-based reasoning to support arguments
	<b>3. Teaching Presence</b>
	Evidence of effective course design and instructional strategies
	Evidence of clear and consistent communication of learning objectives

	Evidence of clear and consistent communication of learning objectives and expectations
	Use of appropriate feedback and support to facilitate learning
	<b>4. Community</b>
	Evidence of a sense of belonging and connectedness among participants
	Demonstrations of support and collaboration among participants
	Evidence of collective responsibility for the learning process
	<b>5. Content</b>
	Appropriateness and relevance of course content to learning objectives
	Evidence of a deep understanding of course content among participants
	Evidence of application of course content to real-world situations
	<b>6. Assessment</b>
	Effectiveness of assessment strategies in measuring learning outcomes
	Alignment of assessments with course objectives
	Evidence of feedback and support to enhance learning and improve performance

## **APPENDIX 2 - Interview Questions for Educators**

1. How do you design and facilitate online discussions to promote critical thinking and language development among ESL students?
2. In your opinion, how can blended learning support language acquisition and development for ESL students?
3. What strategies do you use to create a sense of community in your online classroom and encourage English language practise among your students?
4. How do you balance the need for structure and guidance in online learning with the need for student autonomy and self-direction?

5. Can you share examples of successful online collaborative learning experiences you have facilitated among ESL students?
6. How do you assess and provide feedback on language development and use in online discussions and assignments?
7. How do you address language barriers or difficulties in online learning environments, particularly for ESL students?
8. What are the most effective ways to use technology to support ESL language learning in blended learning environments?
9. How do you address cultural differences and diversity among ESL students in your online classroom?
10. What challenges have you encountered in using blended learning to teach ESL, and how have you addressed these challenges?

### **APPENDIX 3 - Focus Group Discussion Questions**

1. Do you feel that blended learning has helped you develop your critical thinking skills in English language learning? Can you provide specific examples?
2. How has the educators' facilitation of the online discussion forums and other social media platforms impacted your engagement with the course materials and other students?
3. Can you describe how you have been able to apply the English language skills you have learned in your blended learning courses to your daily life?

4. How has the instructor provided opportunities for you to connect with and learn from other English language students outside of the blended learning courses?
  
5. How has the instructor helped you to overcome any challenges or obstacles you have faced in your blended learning courses, particularly those related to language barriers or technology issues?

## APPENDIX 4 - Ethical Clearance



05 December 2023

Omawathie Ramlakan (223061594)  
School Of Education  
Edgewood Campus

Dear O Ramlakan,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00006377/2023

Project title: Unpacking blended learning in higher education: An inductive analysis of English Second Language teaching practices at Tabuk University

Degree: Masters

### Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 31 October 2023 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted FULL APPROVAL.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 05 December 2024.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

### Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3357 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/research-ethics>

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

## APPENDIX 5 - Informed Consent Form

### LETTER OF INTRODUCTION AND INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

**Title of the Study:** Exploring the impact of blended learning on academic achievement for university students learning English as a second language.

---

**Researcher:** Ms Omawathie Ramlakan (Navee)

**University of KwaZulu Landline:** N/A

**Email:**

---

**You are cordially invited to participate in an academic research study due to your experience and knowledge in the research area, namely Blended learning.**

**Purpose of the study:**

1. To determine how social and cognitive presence are developed in blended learning environments for ESL university students.
2. To investigate the impact of teaching presence on the development of social and cognitive presence in blended learning environments for ESL university students.
3. To identify effective strategies for enhancing social and cognitive presence in blended learning environments for ESL university students.
4. To explore the relationship between social and cognitive presence and academic achievement in blended learning environments for ESL university students.

The results of the study may be published in an academic journal. You will be provided with a summary of our findings upon request. No participants' names will be used in the final publication.

**Duration of the study:** The study will be conducted over a period of 1 year, and its projected completion date is February 2024.

**Research procedures:** The study is based on observations, questionnaires, and interviews.

**Your rights:** Your participation in this study is very important. You may, however, choose not to participate, and you may also stop participating at any time without stating any reasons and without any negative consequences. You, as a participant, may contact the researcher at any time to clarify any issues pertaining to this research. The respondent, as well as the researcher, must each keep a copy of this signed document.

**Confidentiality:** All information will be treated as confidential, and data will be kept confidential. Your details and that of your organisations will be kept anonymous, and only my supervisor can access the raw data. The relevant data will be destroyed, should you choose to withdraw.

For further information on this research, please feel free to contact my supervisor: Dr L.L.Mbatha, [MbathaL5@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:MbathaL5@ukzn.ac.za)

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may also contact the: UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

## WRITTEN INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Research Study: Exploring the impact of blended learning on academic achievement for university students learning English as a second language.

**Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies.**

- |  | YES                      | NO                       |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. My questions about the study have been answered satisfactorily, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher. |                          |                          |
| 4. I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. I consent to audio-visual recording and photographs of any part of or all research activities (if applicable)   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. I consent to the publication of results from this study on the condition that my identity will not be revealed.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

I consent that I am free to withdraw at any time.

**Participant name:** \_\_\_\_\_ (please print)

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher name:** Ms Omawathie Ramlakan (Navee)

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX 6 - Gatekeeper's Letter

KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA  
**University of Tabuk**  
Deanship of scientific Research



المملكة العربية السعودية  
**جامعة تبوك**  
عمادة البحث العلمي

### To home it may concern

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I give Omawathie Ramlakan (English Teacher at University of Tabuk) a permission to conduct the research titled" Unpacking Blended Learning in Higher Education: An Inductive Analysis of English Second Language Teaching Practices at Tabuk University&quot; as a part of her master degree at University of KWAZULU UNIVERSITY, using observation focused group on samples from faculty members and students from university of Tabuk

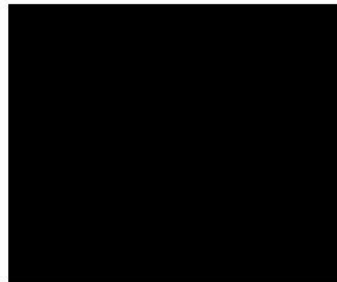
This letter has been issued upon the request of Omawathie without any liability

If we have any concerns or require additional information feel free to contact us

Sincerely

Dean of Research and graduate studies

Othman Alzahrani



تليفون 0144250974 Tel.: فاكس 0144250983  
مس.ب: P.O Box 4279 تبوك: Tabuk71491  
المملكة العربية السعودية Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

السرقة:.....  
التاريخ:.....  
المرفقات:.....

## **APPENDIX 7 - Editor's Letter**

[REDACTED]  
Mrs G C Hannant

[REDACTED]  
2196

10 July 2024

### **TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN**

I certify that I have edited the Master's thesis:

**Unpacking Blended Learning in Higher Education: An Inductive Analysis of  
English Second Language Teaching Practices at Tabuk University**

by

**Omawathie Ramlakan**

However, the correction of all errors/missing information remains the responsibility of  
the author.

[REDACTED]  
G.C. HANNANT (BA HED)