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## Teachers' Experience of Blended English Language Learning

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## Teachers' Experience of Blended English Language Learning

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### Abstracts:

To address current Emiratization goals for teachers who teach English Medium Subjects, the Abu Dhabi Education Council partnered with a for-profit English language professional development provider to conduct a 6-week trial of a blended English language learning program for Emirati teachers. The current qualitative narrative study was undertaken to learn more about the lived experiences of 11 participants in the program. Participants had access to an online training program and spent 60 to 70% of the training program time in self-paced online learning, and attended face to face sessions with an English trainer for 30-40% percent of the training program time. Overall, most participants generally expressed satisfaction with the program, although some participants expressed concerns about the timing for the training, duration, rigor level, and lack of contextualization. The current research base on the efficacy of such programs in the MENA context is limited. Recommendations include further quantitative program evaluation, using learning outcomes data, and incorporating feedback from participants in the current program into planning for future blended language programs.

**Keynote:** education, language learning, blended learning, professional development, United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi

## "خبرات المعلمين من تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية المخلوطة"

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### الملخص:

بهدف توطين وظيفة معلمي المواد التي تُدرس باللغة الانجليزية، أبرم مجلس ابوظبي للتعليم اتفاقاً مع أحد مزودي خدمات تنمية اللغة الانجليزية لتقديم برنامج للتدريب على اللغة الانجليزية لمدة 6 أسابيع بطريقة التدريب المدمج للمعلمين الإماراتيين. وقد أُجريت الدراسة الحالية وهي دراسة نوعية استقرائية لمعرفة المزيد من خبرات المعلمين الذين التحقوا بالبرنامج. حيث تم تزويد المتدربين بمواد تدريبية إلكترونية من خلالها يقضي المتدربون ما بين 60 الى 70 % من وقت البرنامج بالتعلم الذاتي ومن ثم حضور المتبقي من الوقت 40 الى 30 % في حصص تدريبية مع مدرب للغة الانجليزية. بشكل عام، أعرب معظم المشاركين عن رضاهم عن البرنامج، على الرغم من أن بعض المشاركين أعربوا عن قلقهم بشأن مدة التدريب، والمستوى، وعدم اتساقها مع تخصصاتهم. ( كلمة مفقودة )..... قاعدة البحث الحالي على فاعلية هذه البرامج في منطقة الشرق الاوسط و شمال افريقيا محدودة.

تشمل التوصيات على إجراء المزيد من برامج التقييم الكمي، وذلك باستخدام بيانات مخرجات التعلم، ودمج التغذية الراجعة من المشاركين في البرنامج الحالي في التخطيط لبرامج اللغة المخلوطة في المستقبل.

## Introduction

The United Arab Emirates is an oil-rich state located in the Arabian Peninsula. The country consists of seven Emirates, which include Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al Qaiwan, Ras al Khaimah, and Fujairah. Abu Dhabi is the most resource-rich of the seven Emirates. Abu Dhabi is a large Emirate, which is comprised of three major areas: Abu Dhabi City, Al Ain, and Al Gharbia (Western region). The Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) is the government entity responsible for education in Abu Dhabi, in collaboration with the UAE Ministry of Education (MoE). All Emirati students are entitled to free public education through undergraduate tuition at the state colleges. The system begins with Kindergarten 1 and 2 (KG1, KG2) (ages 3-5 years), followed by Cycle One (C1) (grades 1-5), Cycle Two (C2) (grades 6-9), and Cycle Three (C3) (grades 10-12). In 2006, ADEC launched the New School Model (NSM) (now called Abu Dhabi School Model, ADSM), a major educational reform program which consists of changes in the medium of instruction, instructional and pedagogical shifts, and professional learning for teachers and leaders. In the ADSM, KG-grade 8, English, Math, and Science are taught in English. To facilitate these changes, teachers from Western countries now teach most English Medium Subjects (English, Math, and Science in KG-C2 and English in C3) alongside some National teachers and expatriate Arab teachers who meet language requirements (IELTS Academic band score 6.5+ for English/Math/Science). Like many Gulf countries, Abu Dhabi is engaged in a serious effort to employ National citizens rather than expatriates in both public and private sector employment; this process is called Emiratization. Two of the major barriers to Emiratization in the education sector are: changing language requirements (Gallagher, 2011) and the perception of teaching as a low-status profession (Raven, 2011).

In an effort to address the former challenge, the Abu Dhabi Education Council partnered with a for-profit English language professional development provider to conduct a 6-week trial of a blended English language learning program. The current study was undertaken to learn more about the lived experiences of 11 participants in the program. Participants had access to an online training program and spent 60 to 70% of the training program time in self-paced online learning. They attended face to face sessions with an English trainer for 30-40% percent of the training program time. The model allowed participants to recap what was learned, while at the same time allowing the trainer to help and support the trainees with their weaknesses

and challenges. The need to create a blended English training program came from the lack of free time for overwhelmed teachers who need to learn English but who may not be fully comfortable and ready to use an online-only training program. The pilot was conducted at a Cycle 3 government school for girls, located in the city of Abu Dhabi, during the 2014/15 school year. All pilot participants were female teachers who taught at the school during the 2014/15 school year. Twelve Math and Science teachers whose overall IELTS Academic band scores were at or below 5.0 participated. All Math and Science teachers at the school who met this requirement were invited to voluntarily participate. Despite the short duration of the program and the fact that the sample size ( $n=12$ ) was too small to show statistical significance, initial results indicated considerable progress for most (10 out of 12) participants. This result led decision-makers to want to learn more about the lived experiences of the participants, which is the focus of the current study.

### **Review of Related Literature**

The research base on the use of online learning for adult English Language Learners in the MENA region is limited, but there are some examples of its use. The University of Sharjah has utilized online learning platforms (specifically Blackboard) since 2004. Abulibdeh (2011) examined the relationships between students’ perceived IT self-efficacy, online interactions (student/student, student/content, and student/instructor), and achievement. While students in the study consistently rated their own IT self-efficacy as high, there was no statistically significant relationship between IT self-efficacy and achievement, in contradiction to previous studies on the subject (Bates, 2006; Gaythwaite, 2006; and Johnson et al, 2000). Significant positive relationships were found to exist with regard to all three types of online interactions and student achievement. Student/content interactions provided the highest degree of correlations to achievement. Recommendations included: encouraging instructions to engage more fully with the features of the learning platform, providing remediation for students with low IT self-efficacy, making online course content more engaging, and providing opportunities for student feedback throughout the course.

Learners’ attitudes toward online English language courses at a state university in Turkey were measured by Cinkara and Bagceci (2013), using the Online Language Learning Attitude test (OLLAT). A statistically significant relationship between a positive score on the OLLAT and course success was determined by the research. The researchers provided historical background on distance/online learning, beginning with correspondence courses in 1892 and moving into mail-based correspondence, radio

broadcasting of courses, videoconferencing, and, finally, blended and online learning. Facets of effective online course design identified by Hall et al (2001) are directionality, usability, consistency, interactivity, multimodality, adaptability, and accountability. Previous research from Oxford (2001) showed a positive relationship between learner attitude and performance in language courses. The authors outlined challenges facing language instructors in the state university in Turkey, including class sizes of 700+ students, a very high teacher/student ratio (student enrollment increased five-fold in five years, without commensurate hiring) and a lack of on-site technology to facilitate learning in classrooms. A voluntary sample of over 3500 students revealed that over 50% of students had a positive attitude toward online learning, with only 11% having a negative attitude. Students with a positive attitude were significantly more likely to have done better in the course and to have better formal assessment grades. Male and female students did not have significantly different OLLAT scores. One factor shown to contribute to positive attitudes was a positive self-concept of computer literacy.

Al Alami (2014) contrasts achievement of non-English major EFL university students in Dubai in a traditional general English language course, versus those enrolled in a proposed literature course (LEARN and GAIN). Literature courses in an EFL context should focus on: stylistics (style in historical/cultural context), critical pedagogy, positive relationships, and a positive learning environment. The LEARN and GAIN course is based on the principles of communicative language, including: contextualized settings, learner-centered approach, frequent participant interactions, cooperative learning, varied tasks, life-like situations, and a focus on participant enjoyment of tasks. Key components of the class included: warm-up activities; reading in action; language practice; varied oral production; writer's workshop; self-evaluation; and portfolio creation. Statistically significant differences on a pre-post-test in both reading and writing were achieved by the experimental group versus the control group. No statistically significant difference was demonstrated between males/females and science/non-science majors. Recommendations for teaching EFL university students included: utilizing novels and short stories, especially high-interest literature; employing an eclectic pedagogical approach; ensuring reliable ongoing assessment, including self-assessment; and focusing on ongoing self-assessment, as an instructor. The author concludes that the keys to effective EFL teaching are exposure, practice, and involvement (cognitive, affective, and interactive).

Erguvan (2014) studied the use of Achieve 3000, which is an online ICT program, which provides leveled reading and writing activities. It is used in both K-12 and undergraduate university programs. Eight ESL instructors from a private university in Kuwait utilized the program to support teaching and learning in two English for Academic purposes (EAP) courses. The researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews to learn about the instructors’ experiences in using the program and their attitudes toward it. Strengths of the program were enhanced student motivation, course differentiation, and students’ enhanced reading abilities. Drawbacks were: plagiarism/cheating; decontextualized material; issues with ICT, course management, and workload; difficulty providing feedback to students; and a focus on reading rather than writing. Six of the instructors indicated that they would recommend the program, with some suggestions for improvement (e.g., enhancing feedback mechanisms and managing grading course-load), one was hesitant, and one would not recommend the program. Instructors reported that students seemed to be motivated by the program, but some students complained that it was too much work. Overall, Achieve 3000 appeared to enhance student motivation and provide a greatly enhanced degree of differentiation to meet student needs.

Using a Differential Item Functioning (DIF) approach, Abbot (2006) investigated the use of top-down versus bottom-up reading strategy approaches as they impacted the performance of Mandarin and Arabic native speakers on the CaMaithan Language Benchmarks Assessment (CLBA). Mandarin speakers were found to utilize more bottom up approaches (e.g., scanning for detail, chunking, identifying synonyms or paraphrases, matching key textual and item vocabulary). Arabic speakers were found to utilize more top-down strategies (e.g., skimming for gist, connecting information, drawing inferences). Reasons posited for this included both reading strategies in L1 and different approaches to English language instruction in the home countries. The authors suggest a balanced approach to reading instruction in ESL courses, ensuring that test item developers are aware of differences in approach, and a greater understanding of differences by ESL teachers.

Working in the U.S., but with L1 Arabic students, Fuqua (2015) conducted a qualitative study on perception of first language (L1) Arabic students and their English instructors at the English Language Institute (ELI) at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) after using the “read and copy” strategy, based on Susser and Robb (1990), for three weeks. The strategy consists of, “... copying word for word what they are reading in 3 – 5 word ‘chunks’ without looking at what they are writing on their paper for five minutes.” Students were asked to use the strategy at home every day for three

weeks. After three weeks teachers reported improvement in the writing skills exhibited by these students. Students reported that they enjoyed the strategy, found it useful, and would continue to use it on their own.

Kripps (2013) reviewed a variety of vocabulary building strategies for first language Arabic speakers. From the experiments cited in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman and UAE, vocabulary knowledge and expansion were found to be most enhanced when a variety of strategies are used, including: games, learner-made flash cards, mnemonic strategies, word lists, dictionary activities, guessing meaning from context, scrambled letter, word formation, dictation practice, pantomime, and analyzing affixes and roots. While these strategies have been found to produce greater results than exclusive use of a textbook and “teach and talk” methods, the study found that many learners have little exposure to the plethora of effective supplemental strategies that can scaffold their learning and help them gain greater independence as learners. It was also noted that there is research to support “...incorporating intensive reading for as little as 10 minutes per session a few days per week [in order to] yield noticeable benefits.” Kripps concluded that the L1 Arab learner has a significant burden of independently identifying and implementing effective vocabulary building and consolidation activities due to the traditional teaching methods that are still the mainstay of English language instruction in the region.

Kemp (2013) explored the receptiveness towards the introduction of blended learning through the cultural framework dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In this first of its kind study in the UAE, affinity for and comfort level with blended learning formats were explored as a function of the amount of uncertainty represented in the layers of engagement and interaction. The following indicators were associated with certainty: learner familiarity with technology, learner acknowledgement of course structure and appreciation of feedback. Uncertainty was increased by assignment to group work, lack of detail in course structure, and the introduction of new and different online activities. The results of the study provide instructors and facilitators guidelines to bridge the gap between traditional, expected (low UA) learning modalities and blended learning opportunities which introduce a higher level of uncertainty. Recommendations were categorized within the following set of descriptive codes: assignment deadlines, different (from traditional face to face), exams, group work, documenting knowledge acquisition, material, professor, and research sources. While the research base on the use of online



methodologies to support adult English Language Learners in the MENA context is limited, a review of the literature reveals that this appears to be a promising approach.

### Methods

Qualitative research is often used when the field of research in the context is narrow, variables are ambiguous, and/or the researcher wants to begin to explore emerging trends (Creswell, 2009). When conducting narrative qualitative research, the “narratives of experience are both personal—they reflect a person’s life history—and social—they reflect the milieu, the contexts in which teachers live” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). The Abu Dhabi School Model requires huge growth in teachers’ English language proficiency; however, research on contextualized approaches to meet this challenge is extremely limited. For the current study, the sample size ( $n=12$ ) is so small as to make quantitative data collection for any purpose other than anecdotal description less meaningful. A narrative approach provides a unique insight into the lived experiences of pilot program participants, which can be used to guide further programming and, ultimately, may inform a larger pilot or a full-scale program. In qualitative interviews, the purpose is to provide “an informant the space to express meaning in his or her own words and to give direction to the interview process” (Brenner, 2006). A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized, which has the benefit of allowing the researcher to work from a prescribed list of questions but also frees him/her to ask follow-up questions based on participant responses (Brenner, 2006).

Narrative data was recorded, after obtaining permission from the interviewees, using an English/Arabic consent form, which was legally translated and then checked by an Arabic speaker. Interviews of approximately 20 minutes in length were conducted with 11 out of 12 pilot program participants. Nine of the participants remained at the school where the pilot was conducted. Two participants had moved to other schools, so two of the researchers travelled to their new school to conduct the interviews. One participant had left the country and was unavailable. All of the interviews, except one, were primarily conducted in English, with at least one native Arabic speaker present and available to provide translation as needed. One of the interviews was conducted primarily in Arabic and translated by the bilingual researcher, due to the lower English language level of the participant. Most participants had a level of English proficiency which allowed them to express themselves with relative ease during the interview. It is acknowledged as a limitation of the study that participants may have

provided more in-depth feedback if the interviews were conducted in Arabic; however, a qualified professional Arabic translator/transcriptionist was not available and two of the researchers are not bilingual, so the decision was made to proceed in English.

Narrative interview results were transcribed by a professional academic transcriptionist and analyzed for themes, using open coding. Once themes emerged, participants' responses were organized according to the themes. All three primary researchers conducted reliability checks once the interviews were coded.

### **The research questions are:**

1. What aspects of the program did participants find to be the most and least useful?
2. Did barriers exist to participants' success in the program? If so what were they?
3. In what ways did the participants perceive the program to be aligned or misaligned with the goals of the Abu Dhabi School Model (ADSM)?

## **Results**

Open-coding revealed ten major emergent themes. These are: participants' *prior experience* with online learning; *inadequate time* for training during the school day and home/life balance; the *duration* of the training; *online versus face to face* aspects of the blended model; *favoured aspects* of the training; the *rigor level* of the program; *collaborative learning*; *fit to ADSM*; *fit to IELTS*, and the *overall quality* of the trainers and the program. In the following section, each of the major themes will be explored.

Overall, most (8 out of 11) training participants who were interviewed stated that they had never participated in any online training previously. Only Hessa, Khuloud, Maitha, and Mawahib had any previous online experience—all of which was very limited. Hessa stated: "I have [experience], but five years ago. [...] I just logged into any program that was online, and I used it to do my IELTS study. [...] And it really helps me to do my IELTS." Khuloud said her experience was, "Like, not *experience*, experience. Sometimes, when I opened a computer, I found a website. So I worked with the Cambridge University, they have questions in English, so I worked on it like that. That's all." Maitha was confident, despite limited experience, stating "I had experience, was training on this [online] Cambridge [program], for a few days and I used [another] program [...] Before, not too much, but I used, I know how to use." Finally, Mawahib described her experience, "When I had

study to IELTS, okay, I have, I had training, online, but like a trial version, not..., and last year too, when we had a training here in the school, okay, I had mini-program but short courses, okay online.” Participants’ responses revealed very limited prior experience using online English language courses. As Kemp (2013) found learner familiarity with technology to be a factor associated with participants’ degree of comfort in online learning, this may be an area for program decision-makers to explore more fully in the future.

Inadequate time for training during the school day, due to teaching schedules, preparation, and other duties was a limitation to the success of the program, which was addressed by nearly all of the participants. Hessa said, “It was very limited time, to finish it. And we just have [time] between our free periods, during the school schedule. And [we are] doing the day’s [teaching] schedule, so we were really pushed to do this program. And at home, I have my time, but during the day it was very limited.” As this was a program for Math and Science teachers, lab preparation and maintenance was an issue highlighted by Maitha, who said, “In the school, I need face to face [training] because [I have] no time in the school to sit online. Because we, most of the time, we are engaged with preparing in the lab and performing experiments and like that.” Muneera provided a suggestion to address this in the future, stating:

But the problem is with the time, only this is the problem [...] I think if we have free time it will be better, maybe at the end of our day’s work or like if we finish at 2 and then maybe take the course between 2 and 4, or maybe start from 8 to 9, so it will be more, more workable than this. Because now we are caring about lessons, we are caring about everything so if we start with [the course] or end with it, it will be more perfect.

Balance between home and work was addressed, with participants having different viewpoints and circumstances. Raya found it easier to work from home, stating, “With our work [in school] we don’t have time. The training was in the school and we can do it in our homes in schools and anywhere, it is a good chance, yes.” For others, including Maitha, the flexibility was limited by her circumstances. She said, “It’s available, it’s good for me because I choose the time which I am free, so because most of time I am engaged in my house work and with my granddaughter, and in my work correction by that, so I prefer to use online because it’s good for me. So I can manage the time which I can use.” Fareeda indicated difficulty using the program at home, but acknowledged that it might work well for others, stating that she used the program “At home, little. Not nothing, but little, or not always, not all the time. But some, there is teachers take at... time for home.

If there is no kids. Some teachers they don't have kids." Some participants identified a busy home life as a potential limiter for the utility of online English learning; however, Kripps (2013) identified that only a few short sessions a week could be of a benefit, so even if use is limited for some participants, it may still be helpful.

Every single participant interviewed noted the duration of the program (six weeks) as too short. Fareeda stated that the program was only for a "Short time.... And if [programs] are continuous, more better. All the teachers said this point [...] Any language, you want to continue." Basha said, "I think it's an important thing, we need more time." Khuloud noted, "It's very short, very short." Shamsa said, "It's not enough time for us to learn, you know." Only one teacher demonstrated some apathy toward the duration of the program. Mawahib said, "Okay, if you decide we continue with the training this year, I like that, okay, but [make it] more specialized..." Hessa suggested that the school might be able to continue the program, even if ADEC didn't make it available; she said, "At the end we want it to be available for us, even though we asked Mr. Raed to let us use this program until the end of this year, and then we will find, he will find a way to let us buy the program." Fareeda pleaded, "We would like to continue. Please, I am in [a different school now] but I want to continue. Don't forget me!" Although it was the nature of the pilot to be brief, participants overwhelmingly preferred a longer duration for the program.

Two major themes emerged, regarding the online versus face to face aspects of the program. The first was the progressive change in the ratio of time spent online versus face to face. Most participants agreed that it was necessary to have more face to face time at the start of the program and increase the amount of online training after participants felt more comfortable. Hessa summed this up, stating:

On the first week, just to guide us on the [program], we need more time to spend with the trainer. And the middle, we find that, okay we can use it, but we still need the trainer to be available for us. But at the end of the program, *khalas* [it is finished] we're used to it. So we just go along whenever we have time, even when we have free time, even if it's not scheduled with the trainer, but whenever we have time, we just go to the lab, and log in, and do it by ourselves. So it was easy then. So we were 90 per cent by our own, and maybe ten or five per cent maybe with the trainer.

The second emerging theme varied greatly, as it related to participants’ preference for online versus face to face training. Fareeda preferred the online training with some one on one support, stating, “When we are a group, face to face, some teacher ask a question, this teacher another question. Sometimes waste my time. So they need to be online, and sometimes, if I need to ask about something, I ask myself to the teacher, together, not all the group.” Mawahib preferred the freedom of online training, stating, “I [prefer more] online because I hadn't time in my duty okay to spend it with trainer, and I feel I am more free with online, okay. I can spend three hours or two hours, it's okay, an afternoon because I was free.” Raya highlighted the efficiency of online training, stating, “If I had a chance to do it anywhere and anytime it would be better than [if] I have a teacher sitting on a chair and she's teaching me. We need this thing but I feel the percentage should be for the online more than sitting with the teacher.” Several teachers, however, expressed the opposite feeling. Basha said, “It's better, speaking, it's better than online, we need more face to face.” Khuloud found the face to face portion to be more serious; regarding the online portion, she said, “I was enjoying [the online], it was like something that I play with at the end, I was enjoying it only.” However, in contrast to Raya’s opinion, Khuloud found face to face to be more efficient, stating, “When I was talking with my teacher, I find many words, I can take the words from her directly. So there is no need to repeat again and like that, yeah. It was good.” Hessa expressed a strong opinion about her belief that face to face is more effective; she said, “It helped me, but it wasn't like if I joined a real class. You know, face to face is more effective than online programs. So if I had the class, directly I would find that my mistakes is where, and he will directly tell me, the teacher or anyone who was tutoring me, and it's really effective than online classes.”

Participants’ favored aspects of the course appeared to be related to their desire for online versus face-to-face content. Those who favored face to face tended to indicate interactions with the instructor as the most helpful part of the course. Khuloud said, “When it was face to face, it was good.” Yamna preferred one on one learning, stating, “I think face to face is better than online because for me it was more useful when she talked with me before, when she talked with me yes. [...] Myself... when she talked with me one on one, it's better for me.” Maitha and Hessa expressed satisfaction with the availability of the trainer. Maitha said, “We had [a] kind teacher, she helped us too much, and she was cooperative because if I forgot sometimes if I was busy another time she come to my office and give me papers.” Hessa said that her instructor “was available for us all the time during the programme. And she guide us, how to use the programme, and how...she's showing how the

score, how much we get in each level of the programme. And it helps me to improve.” Preferring the online aspects, Raya highlighted the program’s flexibility, stating, “It is good that you can see the score and you can make the training more than one time to have the better score. [...] The score, it is very important, I love this thing and this is the one I love.” Muneera expressed satisfaction with both the face to face and online components of the training. She said,

Yeah, she is good teacher, [...] we learn from her a lot of things and how to write, how to explain the grammar more. I think it is good if we have like this program online with some teaching- like us! I am [a] teacher, so sometimes I let the students to search and do something and sometimes I just give them the information, so I think it is like that program.”

Considering that Cinkara and Bagceci (2013) found a statistically significant relationship between learner attitudes toward online learning and their success in such programs, it may be wise for decision-makers to ascertain learners’ attitudes toward online learning prior to the course and perhaps use this information to tailor the balance (online/face to face) of the program.

The rigor level of the program was described by some participants as misaligned to their needs. Maitha, Khuloud, and Raya expressed dissatisfaction with their perception that the level of the program was too low. Maitha felt that the online portion wasted time, stating, “I need more advanced because I feel it is easy. I know all these words, why I sit, because it's easy for me, this online.” Khuloud indicated dissatisfaction with the vocabulary, as well, stating, “The words was very simple for me. I didn't look after the simple words, I was looking the specific words, and especially I wanted in my major, that I am teaching physics, that's what I was looking after that.” Although the program has multiple levels, Raya was not able to access the higher levels; she said, “It is easy at the first when I try it, I think I have to do something more. The teacher didn't open the one after [next module] for me. I am finishing it, this is, I think.” Conversely, through translation, Raya expressed frustration about misalignment between the program and the examination at the end, stating, “The vocabulary [...] in the program was like; it was like very basic versus the examination level was too high.” As all four of these participants expressed specific concerns about the vocabulary in the program, this may indicate an area for future research for program decision-makers.

Participants’ beliefs about the merits of collaborative learning varied but generally focused on their own loss of individual learning due to variability in the levels of the group. Hessa expressed frustration because her levels were higher than her peers, stating, “Alhamdulillah because I am very well in my English language [...] it’s helped them [other teachers], actually. [...] She forced us to speak in English, and they struggled in some words, [more] than me. [...] Yes, it’s not good for me.” Wedad expressed her frustration due to her lower level compared to the group; she said (through translation), “It wasn’t good, it was a bad thing to have different levels because normally some people answer faster than others so they’re not benefitting. [...] Because if someone’s level is lower than the others she was having less attention.” Maitha articulated a widely held view when asked if she felt positively regarding variability within the group. She said:

It depends. If the level, lower than me, too much difference, in this case I don’t prefer because I feel she takes my time, and if it much higher than me it will be difficult because I feel upset, I am depressed, I don’t like that. So when I sit with teachers near to my level I prefer this. Or higher, I mean little higher than my level. [...] Yes. Limited difference.

Many participants indicated that they benefitted from peer interactions. Yamna said, “Not a bad idea [to work all together], maybe I can catch some words only like this [...] but it’s okay.” The most consistent theme which emerged on this topic was participants’ concerns about losing time with the instructor due to the pressures of a mixed group, with most participants expressing a desire for narrow grouping practices.

Over half of the participants (six out of eleven) expressed concerns about the program’s fit to purpose. Areas of concern were a lack of: contextualized subject-area vocabulary, contextualized educational vocabulary, and fit to IELTS preparation. Khuloud, Shamsa, and Mawahib expressed a need for subject-area Science vocabulary. Khuloud said, “I want something in my major, in my subject, I want it in physics. Especially for this school, they are teaching in English, and after two years, all Abu Dhabi will be teaching in English. Science and everything. So, how can I teach my subject in English? [...] That’s what I want.” Shamsa concurred, stating, “It was very helpful really but everything we took was in general, I mean not specific for scientists or for science but just general and when we discussed that with the [instructor], she said we will take that one in [the] advanced [level] after we finish the pilot one.” Mawahib stated her need for educational terminology and subject area vocabulary, stating, “It is good but we needed more especially in, yes the course for teaching, not general because there is

many words for objectives, okay but [they do] not connect with our subject or our work.” Maitha stated that she already knew subject area contextualized vocabulary, but needed help with educational/pedagogical language; she said, “For me it's not difficult in chemistry because I have graduated from the faculty of science and I have studied English. So scientific expressions, it's easy for me. But how can I deal with the students and how can I implement this subject in my lessons? So, we need programs especially for teachers.” Maitha and Raya expressed concern about their perception of a lack of fit between the current program and IELTS, which is the generally accepted language proficiency test for teaching in the Abu Dhabi School Model. Maitha said, “I want to participate in this program but I need an advanced program that deals with IELTS.” Raya bluntly stated her objective: “I feel if [the program] will connect with IELTSs it will be more useful for us as a teacher. I think the questions sometimes or the level is away from what I see on IELTSs. Our main idea is to get a score on IELTSs.”

### **Conclusions, Recommendations, and Further Study**

Overall, most participants generally expressed satisfaction with the program, although some participants expressed concerns about the timing for the training, duration, rigor level, and lack of contextualization. Most of the participants' comments regarding the trainers were positive and indicated that they trainers were well-liked and perceived to be available to meet participants' needs. Hessa said that the trainer was “Really, really helpful. She gave us our weak points, and each one of us, actually, and she set a program [...] [depending] on the ability of each teacher. [...] So it really helps a lot of teachers here.” Although Maitha was not as enthusiastic about the program overall, regarding the instructor, she said, “Face to face, it was very for me, it was very funny and very lovely because we had kind teacher, she helped us too much [...] but [...] I need [something] more advanced because I feel it is easy.” Overall, the duration of the program was a major concern; Raya summed up her feelings, stating, “Yes, for all of us [it was too short] but it was a good experience, I feel. And we have improved our places in a very short time. If it is a long time I think we will find something good.” This overall positive experience is consistent with the limited contextualized research available regarding blended/online English language learning in the MENA context. It is recommended that further research, especially quantitative research related to outcomes, should be undertaken in this area. It is recommended that decision-makers at ADEC should work with program



designers to incorporate the feedback and concerns of the current program participants into planning for future programming.

## Appendix

The table below shows the names of the program participants who were interviewed, in addition to their language levels at the beginning and end of the program. The range of possible levels on the language level is from A1 Low (lowest) to C2 High (highest). Participants' real names were not used.

**Table A1**

Participant	Pre-assessment	Post-Assessment
Fareeda	A1 High	A1 High
Basha	A1 High	A1 High
Hessa	B1 Low	B1 High
Khulood	A2 Low	A2 High
Maitha	B1 Low	B1 High
Mawahib	B1 Low	B1 High
Muneera	A2 Low	A2 High
Raya	B1 Low	B1 High
Shamsa	B1 Low	B1 Mid
Wedad	A1 High	A1 High
Yamna	A1 High	A2 Low

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