# Chapter 4
# Conceptualizing Formative Blended Assessment (FBA) in Saudi EFL

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter sets out a conceptual framework for the design and use of 'blended assessments' that seek to create formative activities that can be characterized by shifting modalities of presentation, variations in time and action, and moves from individual to group work. The study's framing is built upon longitudinal participatory action research based on the research questions. In addition to auto-ethnographic observations, 13 Saudi participants—three course coordinators, seven instructors, and three students—were asked to participate in focus groups and individual interviews. Using qualitative data analysis software, three core characteristics of formative blended assessment were identified: (1) multi-modal activities, flexibility, and peer encouragement, for example, were seen to be an 'advantage'; (2) alignment of pedagogies and assessment tasks were perceived in a 'compatibility' theme; and (3) the possibility of dishonest behaviors and administrative challenges were classed under 'complexity'.*

## INTRODUCTION

In line with global trends, adopting blended approaches to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs in the Saudi higher education system have been met with a series of challenges that include, for example, lack of teacher training, a hesitancy to shift away from traditional pedagogies, and poor support for infrastructure (Al-Qahtani & Higgins, 2013). The integration of digital tools in face-to-face settings, nonetheless "has clearly emerged as the most promising use of technology for second language learn-

ing" (Chapelle, 2016, p. xi). One key area of promise, the integrated use of technology in assessment practices to create 'blended assessments', has received little attention to date. Because of their alignment with current approaches in blended language learning; however, such assessments have the potential to be a powerful agent of innovation in the Saudi context: assessment practices, as has been argued, can truly drive the 21st century curriculum (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 2009).

Blended learning offers greater choice compared to other methods (Littlejohn and Pegler, 2007). Blended learning method can be an answer to the growing issues related to curriculum delivery, access and academic program quality (Picciano, 2009). Blending different approaches in the current teaching and learning programs in higher education can have positive outcomes and support university students with greater flexibility without any limitation of time and place (Vaughan, 2007). Blended courses are observed increasing student engagement in their learning, enhance teacher-student interaction and add flexibility in the curriculum through improvement opportunities. Students have a problem with taking greater responsibility for their learning, partly through gaining competency in the new technologies. Faculty members also find it hard to develop blended courses due to a lack of time, support and resources, and they also have to gain competency in ICT applications (Vaughan, 2007). For the institution, blended learning is an opportunity to expand educational boundary and reduce the problems currently arising.

The rationale for conducting this study is to investigate the characteristics of blended learning and to analyse the data and make recommendations to allow the advantages of ICT in blended learning in Saudi context. Currently, the traditional system is unable to respond, and there is insufficient time and commitment by the universities to plan and build for the future. Therefore, an initiative leading towards blended learning is promising. The chapter's aim is look at the usefulness and influence of blended learning on teaching and learning. Therefore, in this chapter, the design and use of blended assessments are investigated in a study grounded in a key question: Situated in the Saudi context, what are the language course coordinators', instructors' and students' understandings and preferences in the design of formative blended assessment tasks and activities for language learning programs?

## BACKGROUND

This section reviews the literature on blended learning starting with the definition of blended learning. It highlights the area of innovation needed, and impetus for the innovation.

### Definition of Blended learning

According to Mandl and Kopp (2006), blended learning is the felicitous combination of the benefits e-learning offers with the advantages of traditional face-to-face-learning settings. In other words, it is the combination of learning in class and learning online in formal education. In the literature, term blended learning is defined as hybrid, blended and mixed modes (Swan, 2009). Blended learning in this chapter refers to the notion that students generally attend face-to-face classes and have online access to the course content and activities.

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