

Mitigating Systemic English Proficiency Gaps: A Mixed-Methods Synthesis of Longitudinal Learner Trajectories and Blended Scaffolding in Saudi Higher Education

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Abstract

The present research incorporates the existing knowledge on language acquisition theory and development of digital pedagogy to determine the possibility of blended learning (BL) to overcome the long-standing English proficiency gap dilemma in tertiary higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. Incorporating systemic educational determinants with the intervention of tertiary education level, the study investigates how blended learning can erase the so-called readiness gap that learners undergo in English Medium Instruction (EMI) situations. Practical recommendations for implementing scaffolded BL models in classrooms are provided, particularly for late-start learners. Employing an integrated mixed-methods framework, Part A comprises a PRISMA-guided systematic review of 16 empirical studies (2012–2025), establishing a robust evidence base for BL effectiveness in Saudi higher education. Part B triangulates these findings through a qualitative case study of Year 7 "late-start" learners. Thematic analysis was utilized to map cascading challenges in orthography, discourse-level writing, and academic communication. This study outlines actionable strategies for teachers to implement blended learning in EMI classrooms. The results demonstrate that blended learning is effective to enhance writing, speaking, and motivation of students, although the teacher should include clearly defined reading tasks to help students understand. Teachers can use targeted digital scaffolding for productive skills to address these gaps. Results suggest that systemic mitigation requires a dual-track reform: a structural revision of the primary school curriculum to address root causes, and the implementation of evidence-based, scaffolded BL models in higher education to remediate existing proficiency deficits. Google Classroom and Zoom platforms allow teachers to scaffold language practice via a structured peer-feedback, recorded speaking task, and guided writing revision into confidence-building stages. This research offers a novel conceptual payoff by bridging the gap between initial educational contingencies and subsequent institutional solutions. It establishes an integrated research agenda that informs both policy reform and the strategic deployment of digital tools to foster learner resilience in regional ELT settings.

Keywords: Blended Learning, English Proficiency Gaps, Digital Scaffolding, English Medium Instruction (EMI), Saudi Higher Education

1. Introduction

In the contemporary globalized economy, English has emerged as an essential competency, particularly within the context of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Saudi Arabia (Rao, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, this role is explicitly codified in the Vision 2030 reforms, which prioritize educational modernization, international competitiveness, and comprehensive digitalization (Al Fraidan & Alaliwi, 2024). Consequently, English Medium Instruction (EMI) has become the normative standard across diverse disciplines, including medicine, engineering, and business (Alhamami, 2021).

Although national educational policies emphasize English proficiency, formal English language instruction in Saudi public schools has traditionally begun in Year 7. This structural arrangement has delayed English language acquisition for many learners, thereby creating a gap in tertiary-level readiness. As a result, students often enter higher education insufficiently prepared to meet the linguistic demands of university coursework, which adversely affects their confidence and classroom performance (Kartini & Kareviati, 2021). These challenges not only slow the learning process for students but also create instructional difficulties for educators, thereby influencing the effectiveness of EMI classrooms. Existing literature highlights the importance of the critical period of language acquisition, demonstrating that early language exposure is positively associated with long-term proficiency in both literacy and oral communication (Bacus & Alda, 2023; Erk & Ručević, 2021). Conversely, late-start learners frequently encounter cascading challenges, including difficulties in comprehending academically demanding university curricula and lower levels of academic self-efficacy (Al-Wossabi, 2024; Zhu & Strauss, 2025).

Within higher education, the widespread implementation of EMI further intensifies these language proficiency deficits. Although many universities have introduced foundation-year programs to address students' language needs, these initiatives often target the symptoms rather than the underlying structural causes of inadequate English proficiency (Alqarni, 2023). This misalignment between students' linguistic preparedness and institutional expectations not only reduces educational effectiveness but also threatens the achievement of national objectives related to human capital development (Mohiuddin et al., 2023).

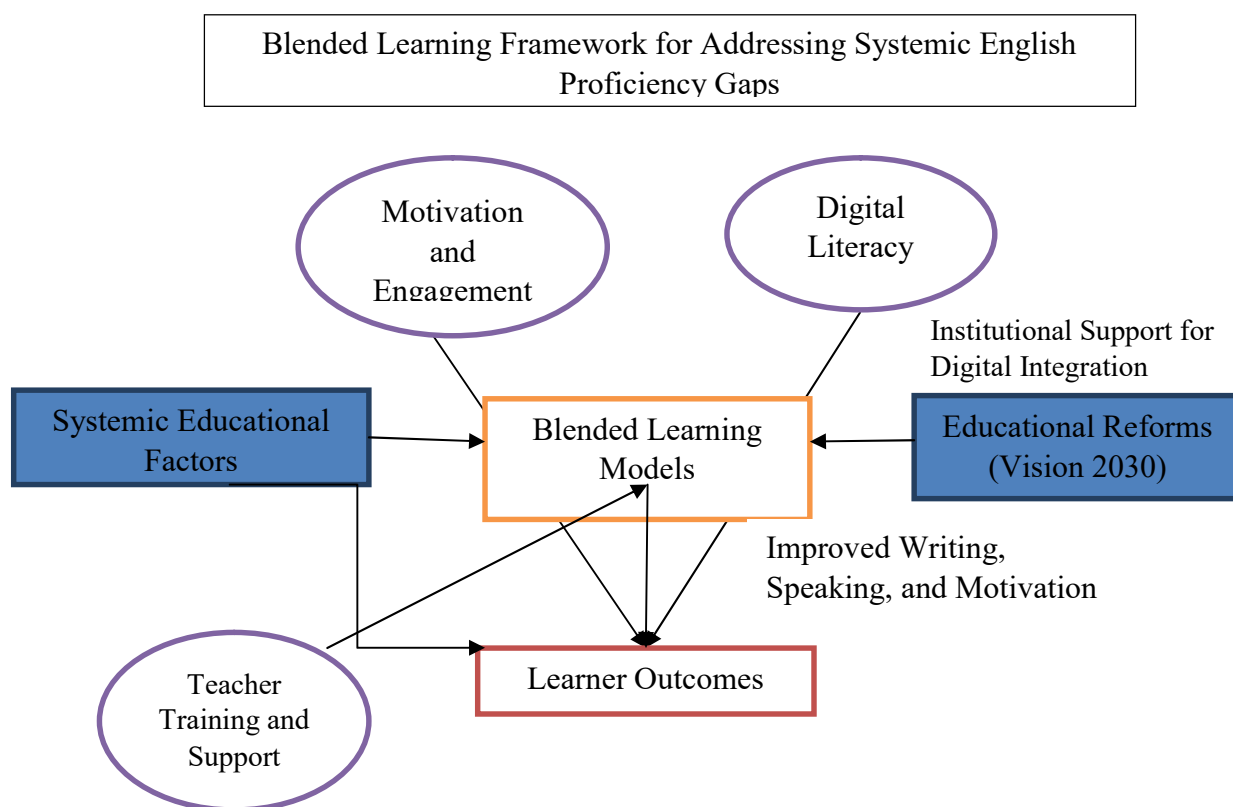
Blended learning (BL) has emerged as a promising pedagogical intervention for addressing the proficiency gaps experienced by late-start English learners by providing scaffolded instructional support (Alghamdi & Alnajami, 2023; Ihnatova et al., 2022). By integrating traditional face-to-face instruction with digitally mediated learning environments, BL creates opportunities for increased learner autonomy while providing

greater exposure to authentic language use (Lingling, 2024). Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of BL in improving productive language skills (Zhang & Zhang, 2025). However, its rapid post-pandemic expansion across Saudi Arabia necessitates a more nuanced evaluation of its effectiveness for learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels (Alfaleh et al., 2025; Bizami et al., 2023).

Collectively, these developments reveal a complex policy dilemma characterized by the tension between the structural realities of late-start English language acquisition and the institutional adoption of digitally enhanced pedagogical approaches (Martinez et al., 2024). Importantly, existing research has largely failed to integrate these two dimensions into a unified analytical framework (Anthony Jr. et al., 2022). Studies conducted at the school level have primarily focused on diagnosing language proficiency problems, whereas investigations in higher education have predominantly evaluated blended learning as an instructional intervention. Consequently, limited research has examined how these interconnected issues influence English language proficiency among Saudi learners across the educational continuum.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that integrates institutional blended learning interventions with measurable learner outcomes, thereby aligning pedagogical design with the educational objectives of Saudi Vision 2030.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Aligning Institutional Blended Learning Interventions with National Strategic Objectives

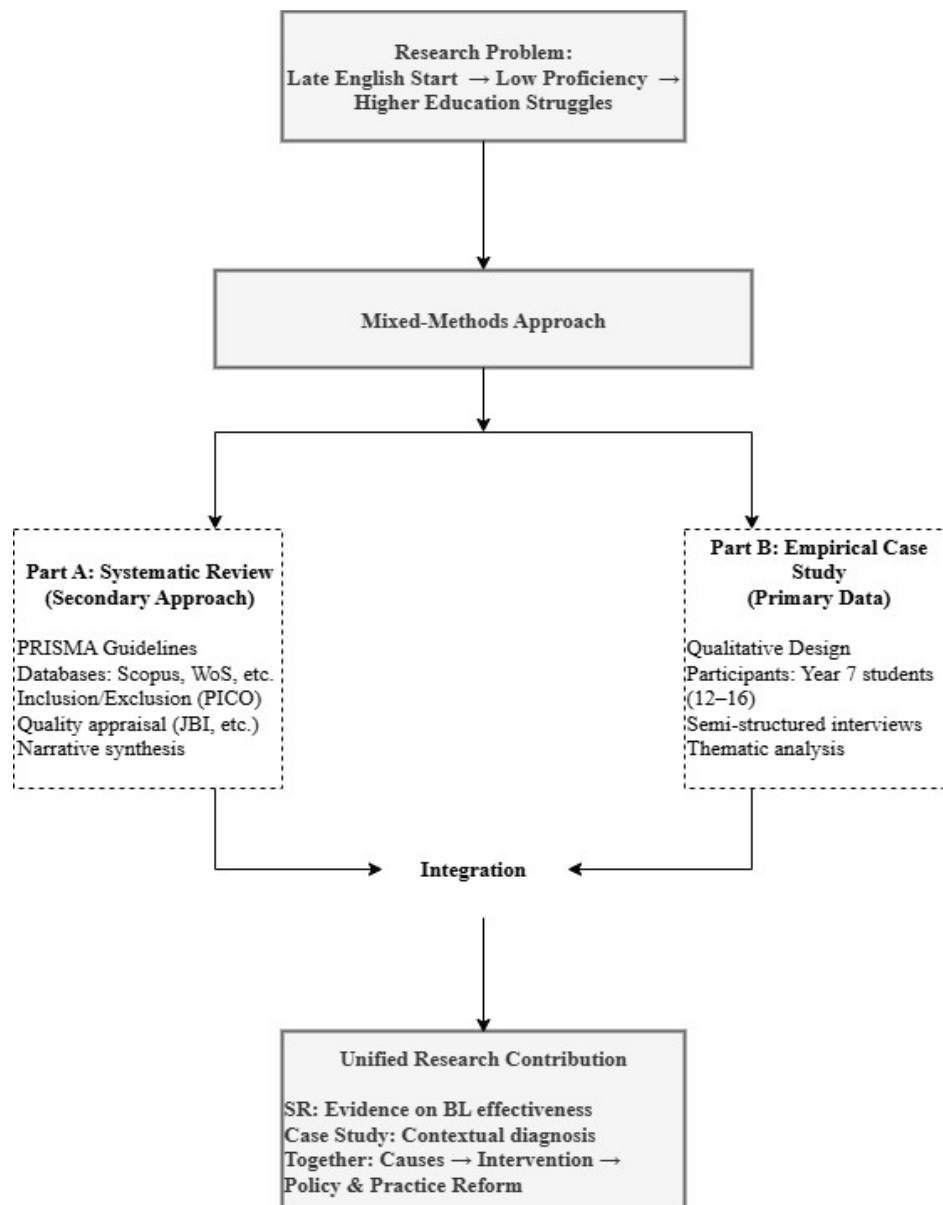


2. Method

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods research design consisting of two complementary phases. The first phase involved a systematic review that synthesized empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of blended learning (BL) in Saudi Arabian higher education. The second phase comprised an interpretivist qualitative case study that explored the lived experiences of Saudi learners who began learning English in Year 7 before transitioning to English-medium higher education (EMI).

The integration of these two phases enabled the study to combine macro-level evidence from published literature with micro-level insights derived from participants' experiences. While the systematic review established the existing body of evidence concerning blended learning interventions in tertiary education, the qualitative investigation explained the educational conditions that precede university learning and influence students' preparedness for blended and English-medium instruction. Consequently, the sequential mixed-methods design provided a comprehensive understanding of English language development across different stages of the Saudi educational system while strengthening the explanatory power and practical implications of the findings.

Figure 2: Study Design Framework



2.1 Phase One: Systematic Review

The first phase employed a systematic review to evaluate the pedagogical effectiveness of blended learning (BL) within Saudi Arabian higher education. The review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Siddaway et al., 2019), thereby ensuring methodological transparency, reproducibility, and reporting quality.

Eligibility criteria were established prior to the review. Studies were included if they investigated tertiary-level students enrolled in Saudi Arabian public or private higher education institutions and evaluated blended learning as the principal instructional intervention. For the purposes of this study, blended learning was operationally defined as the intentional integration of face-to-face instruction with synchronous and asynchronous digital learning activities.

Eligible studies were required to report measurable outcomes related to English language proficiency, affective variables (e.g., motivation, engagement, learner autonomy, and satisfaction), institutional readiness, digital literacy, or faculty perceptions. Only peer-reviewed empirical studies employing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods research designs published between 2010 and September 2025 were included. Editorials, conceptual papers, policy documents, and studies lacking primary empirical evidence were excluded. This systematic review established the empirical foundation for interpreting the qualitative findings presented in Phase Two.

2.1.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Students enrolled in Saudi Arabian public or private higher education institutions	Primary or secondary students; participants outside Saudi Arabia
Intervention	Blended learning integrating face-to-face and digital instruction	Fully online learning, traditional instruction, or technology use unrelated to pedagogy
Comparison	Traditional instruction, baseline groups, or fully online instruction	Studies without a defined intervention or comparison
Outcomes	English language proficiency, motivation, engagement, satisfaction, learner autonomy, digital literacy, and faculty perceptions	Outcomes unrelated to English language teaching
Study design	Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods empirical studies	Editorials, conceptual papers, policy briefs, and book chapters without empirical data
Language	English or Arabic	Other languages

Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and doctoral dissertations	Blogs, reports, unpublished manuscripts, or inaccessible full-text documents
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2.1.2 Search Strategy and Study Selection

A comprehensive literature search was undertaken across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, and ScienceDirect. To minimize publication bias, Google Scholar was additionally searched for relevant grey literature (Harari et al., 2020).

The search was initially conducted between March and April 2025 and updated in September 2025 to include the most recent post-pandemic studies.

Search strings combined three principal concepts: (a) blended learning, (b) English language teaching, and (c) Saudi Arabian higher education. Database-specific Boolean operators, phrase searching, truncation, and indexing terms were employed to maximize retrieval.

Following the removal of duplicate records, studies underwent a two-stage screening process comprising title and abstract screening followed by full-text eligibility assessment. Two independent reviewers screened all studies, while disagreements were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer. Manual searches of reference lists from eligible studies were also conducted to identify additional relevant publications.

2.1.3 Search Terms and Databases

Table 2

Search Strategy, Search Terms, and Databases

Element	Details
Electronic databases	Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, ScienceDirect
Grey literature	Google Scholar
Publication period	January 2010–September 2025
Intervention keywords	"blended learning" OR "hybrid learning" OR "technology-enhanced learning"
Domain keywords	"English language teaching" OR "English instruction" OR EFL OR ELT OR "English-medium instruction"

Context keywords	"Saudi Arabia" OR "Saudi higher education" OR "Saudi universities"
Search techniques	Boolean operators (AND, OR), truncation, phrase searching, and database-specific indexing terms
Additional search	Manual screening of reference lists from included studies

2.1.4 Data Extraction

Data were extracted using a standardized, pilot-tested extraction form that recorded bibliographic information, participant characteristics, institutional context, intervention characteristics, methodological design, and reported learning outcomes.

The standardized extraction procedure enhanced consistency across reviewers while reducing the potential for extraction bias.

2.1.5 Quality Appraisal

The methodological quality of all included studies was evaluated using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal checklists for quantitative studies and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tools for qualitative and mixed-methods research (Tang et al., 2025).

Studies were classified as high, moderate, or low quality according to established appraisal criteria. A sensitivity analysis was subsequently conducted to determine whether lower-quality studies influenced the overall synthesis.

Because substantial methodological heterogeneity existed among the included studies, findings were synthesized narratively following the framework proposed by Popay et al. (2006). Evidence was organized into four overarching themes:

- English language proficiency;
- affective variables;
- pedagogical perceptions; and
- institutional feasibility.

2.2 Phase Two: Qualitative Case Study

The second phase employed an interpretivist qualitative case study to investigate the lived experiences of Saudi learners who began formal English instruction in Year 7 before entering higher education. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm (Mabry, 2008), the study sought to understand how learners interpreted their educational experiences and linguistic development.

This phase specifically examined how delayed exposure to English influenced language proficiency, classroom participation, learner confidence, and preparedness for English-medium instruction (EMI). Rather than measuring learning outcomes, the qualitative investigation explained the educational pathways underlying the proficiency patterns identified in the systematic review.

2.2.1 Participants and Sampling

This study included 24 Saudi middle-school students ($n = 24$) aged between 12 and 16 years who attended government-funded schools. Participants were recruited through purposive snowball sampling because this strategy enabled access to learners possessing direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Sadler et al., 2010). Written parental consent and student assent were obtained prior to participation. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts.

2.2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore learners' experiences of English language learning, curriculum comprehension, oral communication confidence, teacher support, and preparedness for higher education. Interviews were conducted individually in a supportive environment intended to reduce participant anxiety and encourage open discussion. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.2.3 Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, progressing through familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing (Byrne, 2022). To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the analysis incorporated peer debriefing, investigator triangulation, reflexive journaling, and the maintenance of an audit trail documenting all analytical decisions.

2.2.4 Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Derby (Reference No. ETH2122-0014; approved on 1 October 2021). The principal researcher served as the Academic Coordinator within the institution's language support programme. Although this insider position facilitated an in-depth understanding

of curriculum implementation and institutional practices, it also presented potential risks of researcher bias and perceived power imbalances.

To minimize these risks, interviews were conducted with the assistance of an independent research assistant who held no administrative or evaluative role within the institution. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential and would not influence their academic standing or institutional support.

Written informed consent and student assent were obtained before data collection. Participant identities were protected through anonymization and the use of pseudonyms. Throughout the analytical process, reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were employed to acknowledge potential biases and enhance the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity of the findings.

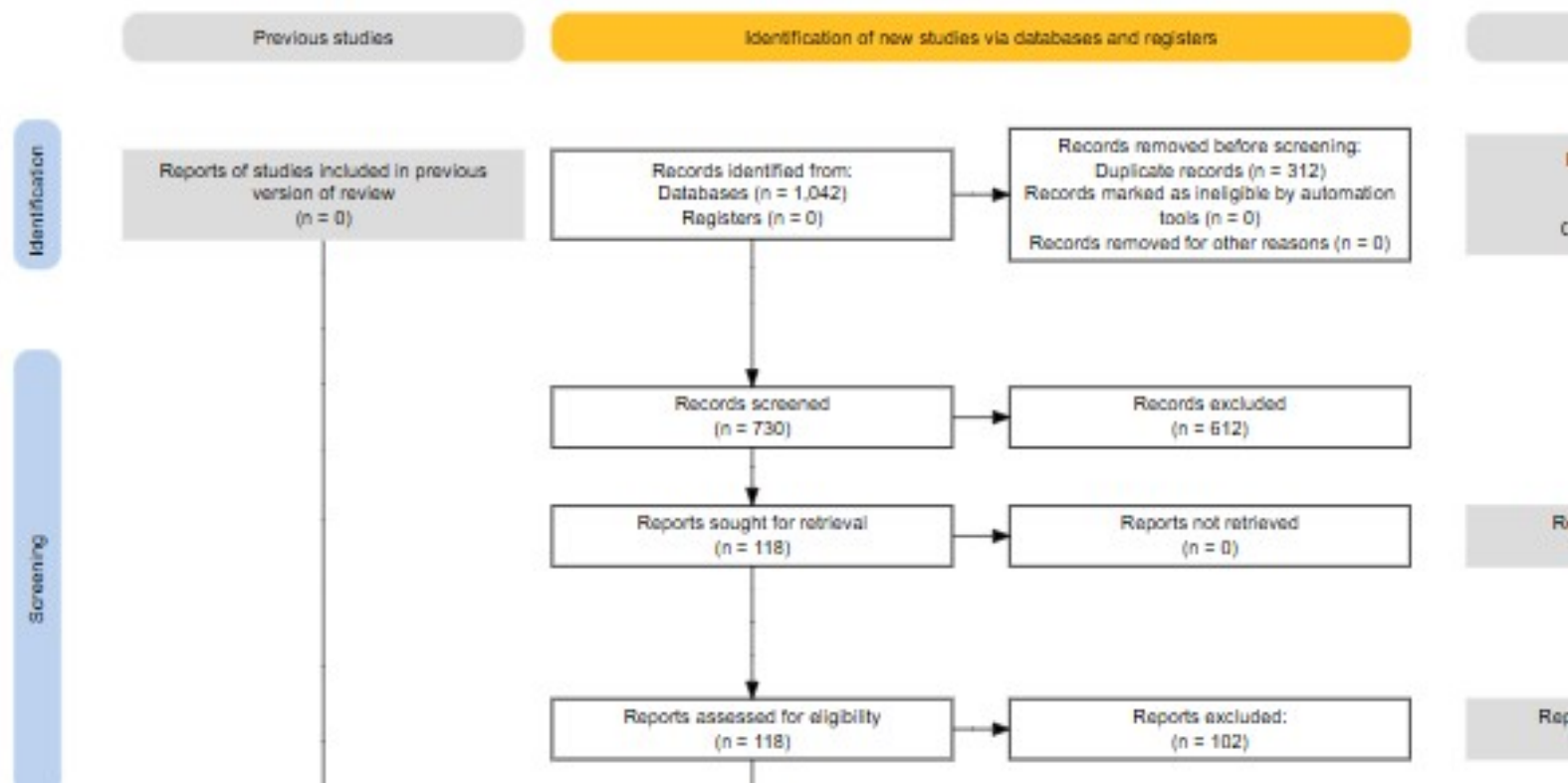
3. Results

Part A: Systematic Review Outcomes

3.1 Selection Flow and PRISMA Analysis

A total of 1,042 records were identified during the initial systematic search conducted across six electronic databases and Google Scholar. After removing 312 duplicate records, 730 titles and abstracts were screened for eligibility. Of these, 612 records were excluded due to irrelevance, leaving 118 full-text articles for critical assessment. During the full-text screening phase, 102 studies were excluded based on the following criteria: contextual misalignment ($n = 58$), absence of a clearly defined blended learning framework ($n = 28$), and lack of English language teaching (ELT) outcome measures ($n = 16$). Consequently, 16 empirical studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the narrative synthesis. The study selection and exclusion process is illustrated through the PRISMA flow diagram presented in Figure 3.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process



3.1.1 Descriptive Profile of Included Studies

The final corpus of 16 studies covered a publication period from 2012 to 2025, with a notable temporal concentration after 2020. This increase reflects the accelerated adoption of digital platforms following the COVID-19 pandemic. Geographically and institutionally, the reviewed studies were primarily conducted in major public universities, including King Saud University, King Abdul-Aziz University, and Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, with additional evidence drawn from private higher education institutions (see Table 3).

3.1.2 Participant Demographics and Research Settings

The sample sizes demonstrated considerable numerical variation, ranging from small-scale classroom experiments ($n = 16$) to large-scale surveys involving more than 1,000 participants. The gender distribution (58% female) corresponds with broader demographic patterns reported in Saudi higher education contexts. Most studies focused on Foundation Year English programs or English for Academic Purposes (EAP), whereas a smaller number examined discipline-specific English Medium Instruction (EMI) contexts, particularly in medicine and business education.

3.1.3 Methodological and Interventional Diversity

Methodologically, the reviewed corpus consisted of seven quantitative studies (primarily quasi-experimental designs), five qualitative investigations (employing interviews and classroom observations), and four mixed-methods studies. The blended learning (BL) intervention frameworks varied considerably across the included studies:

- **Flipped Classroom Models:** Incorporating asynchronous, pre-recorded lectures alongside classroom-based activities.
- **Learning Management System (LMS) Integration:** Employing institutional platforms such as Blackboard and Moodle to support blended instruction.
- **Mobile and Social Pedagogies:** Utilizing mobile applications and social media platforms to facilitate classroom interaction and collaborative learning.

The duration of these interventions ranged from a single academic term to a complete academic year, offering insights into both short-term and longitudinal effects of digital scaffolding on English language learning.

3.1.4 Impact on English Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement

Linguistic proficiency emerged as the most frequently examined primary outcome across the 16-study corpus. The analytical synthesis revealed that six studies reported statistically significant improvements in at least one of the four macro-skills when blended learning was compared with traditional face-to-face instruction (Al Bataineh et al., 2019; Al Hassan & Shukri, 2017; Alrouji, 2020; Alzahrani, 2017; Bibi et al., 2025; Sheerah & Goodwyn, 2016).

3.1.5 Domain-Specific Outcomes

The findings indicated an uneven impact of blended learning across language skills:

- **Productive Skills (Writing and Speaking):** These skills demonstrated the most substantial improvements, which were attributed to increased opportunities for asynchronous drafting, feedback provision, and synchronous oral practice facilitated by digital platforms.
- **Receptive Skills (Reading and Listening):** In contrast, improvements in receptive skills were less consistent. Several studies reported negligible differences between blended learning and traditional instructional groups. This suggests that current digital interventions may require stronger pedagogical scaffolding to effectively enhance deep reading comprehension among late-start learners.

3.1.6 Academic Achievement Metrics

Beyond specific linguistic outcomes, the reviewed studies examined broader indicators of academic achievement, including standardized examination scores and course completion rates. Although 21 distinct study iterations reported positive associations between blended learning implementation and academic success, eight studies identified no statistically significant differences compared with traditional pedagogical approaches. This variation suggests that the effectiveness of blended learning depends largely on instructional design, pedagogical alignment, and institutional preparedness rather than technology adoption alone.

3.2 Affective Variables, Digital Literacy, and Institutional Feasibility

3.2.1 Motivation, Engagement, and Learner Autonomy

Affective variables represented a prominent theme across both quantitative surveys and qualitative investigations. The synthesized evidence indicated that blended learning significantly enhanced student motivation by increasing flexibility, promoting active participation, and supporting learner engagement. Furthermore, 15 studies reported a positive relationship between blended learning and learner autonomy, as students demonstrated greater self-efficacy in managing their linguistic development.

However, this affective benefit was strongly influenced by students' initial levels of digital literacy and self-regulatory ability. Learners with limited technological competence frequently reported reduced motivation, technological anxiety, and increased frustration.

3.2.2 Digital Equity and Student Satisfaction

Although digital literacy generally improved across the reviewed studies, the findings revealed significant geographical disparities in learning outcomes. Institutions located in urban areas benefited from stronger technological infrastructure, whereas rural institutions encountered systemic barriers, including unstable internet connectivity and limited access to technological resources. These disparities directly influenced student satisfaction.

Higher satisfaction levels were consistently associated with studies that implemented purposeful pedagogical redesign by integrating online and face-to-face learning activities. Conversely, passive blended learning approaches that merely transferred traditional lectures into digital formats were associated with lower satisfaction levels.

3.2.3 Teacher Perceptions and Institutional Feasibility

The review identified a complex perception among instructors regarding blended learning implementation. Although teachers widely acknowledged the pedagogical benefits of blended approaches, they also reported substantial operational challenges, including increased workload, inadequate professional development opportunities, and continuous requirements for technical support.

Institutional feasibility was largely dependent on resource availability and administrative commitment. Well-resourced universities maintained effective Learning

Management Systems (LMSs) and provided institutional support, whereas smaller institutions experienced implementation difficulties due to limited infrastructure, logistical constraints, and insufficient access to specialized technical assistance.

3.2.4 Summary of Reported Outcome Ranges

As presented in Table 4, the largest effect sizes were observed in affective and productive skill domains, particularly motivation ($d = 0.72$), writing ($d = 0.68$), and speaking ($d = 0.63$). Across the reviewed studies, blended learning consistently contributed to improvements in students' writing fluency, speaking confidence, and classroom motivation. However, reading comprehension outcomes indicated a continued need for explicit instructional support and targeted digital reading strategies.

Conversely, reading ($d = 0.37$) and grammar-focused outcomes demonstrated comparatively smaller gains, highlighting the limitations of technology-driven interventions in developing reading comprehension and improving structural accuracy without appropriate pedagogical support.

Table 3

Study Characteristics of Included Research (N = 16)



Author(Year)	Study Design	No. of Participants	Analysis Type	Main Findings	Main Implications
Sheerah & Goodwyn (2016)	Systematic Review	Nil	Narrative Synthesis	Blended cohorts outperformed traditional groups in writing.	Blended models enhance productivity in complex language tasks.
Alasraj & Alharbi (2014)	Case study (Quantitative)	62	Inferential Statistics	Flexibility valued; students struggled With self-regulation.	Necessity of learner training in self-directed strategies.
Hamouda (2018)	Quantitative	60	Survey Analysis/ANOVA	Significant gains in vocabulary acquisition and satisfaction.	Digital vocabulary tools strengthen EMI readiness.
Alhusban (2022)	Mixed method	70/20	Descriptive/Thematic	Marked improvement in oral communication and fluency.	Blended tasks facilitate authentic oral output.
Alowed (2020)	Mixed method	63	Descriptive/Thematic	High satisfaction; weak engagement among low achievers.	Instructional design must differentiate by proficiency level.
Alhramelah & Alshahrani (2020)	Cross-sectional	73	MANOVA	Longitudinal gains in listening and reading.	Balanced integration of input/output tasks is vital.
Albiladi & Alshareef (2019)	Systematic Review	Nil	Grounded theory	Faculty resistance linked to increased workloads	Requirement for robust institutional training and support.
Ali, Khan & Alouraini (2023)	Quasi-experimental	76	Regression Analysis	Enhanced grammar acquisition under blended modalities.	Digital grammar practice mitigates classroom time constraints.
Gulnaz, Althomali & Alzeer (2020)	Cross-sectional	200	Survey Analysis	Motivation high; internet access issues limited equity.	Infrastructure gaps directly impact equity of outcomes.
Khan (2014)	Descriptive research	25	Descriptive Statistics	Fostered deeper critical reading and Text analysis.	BL promotes higher-order cognitive Engagement with texts.
AlZumor (2013)	Survey research	160male students	ANOVA	Writing improved; peer feedback quality remained variable	Instructor mediation required for online peer-review tasks.
Alfahadietal (2015)	Survey	35	Factor analysis	Engagement predicted by LMS usability and interface design.	User-centric technology design is central to BL success.
Alzahrani (2017)	Qualitative review	Nil	Narrative Synthesis	Video-recorded tasks significantly improved speaking fluency.	Digital recordings encourage risk-taking in oral practice.
AlHassan & Shukri (2017)	Quantitative research	104	Regression Analysis	Measurable gains in learner Autonomy and digital literacy.	Blendedenvironmentscultivate21st-Century competencies.
Alrouji(2020)	Quantitative	70	Paired t-test	Students correlated BL participation with exam success.	BL frameworks must align with assessment design.
AlBataineh, Banikalef & Albashtawi (2019)	Quasi-experimental	28	ANOVA	No significant impact on reading comprehension scores	Some receptive skills remain resistant to digital-only design.

Table 4

Meta-Synthesis of Blended Learning Effect Sizes by Language Skill (N = 16)

Language Skill	Reporting Studies (n)	Range of Reported Effects	Analytical Interpretation of Trends
Writing	9	0.45–1.10	Blended learning (BL) consistently optimized writing fluency and organizational coherence. Gains were statistically associated with asynchronous feedback loops and self-paced digital drafting environments.
Speaking	7	0.40–0.85	Pronunciation and oral confidence improved significantly due to increased pedagogical affordances for digital recording and video-based peer interaction.
Listening	6	0.30–0.70	Effectiveness was driven by multimodal exposure and repeated playback opportunities; however, outcomes remained highly dependent on task-specific instructional design.
Reading	8	0.20–0.55	BL demonstrated a marginal impact on reading development. Students tended to rely on traditional reading strategies due to a documented lack of specific digital reading scaffolding.
Grammar and Vocabulary	5	0.28–0.70	Improvements were associated with gamified digital modules; however, gains were nonlinear and varied according to learners' initial proficiency levels.
Motivation and Engagement (Affective Outcomes)	10	0.55–0.95	BL functioned as a high-impact affective scaffold, consistently enhancing learner confidence and participation. The effect was strongest when digital tools were used for reflective mediation, effectively reducing the writing anxiety commonly experienced by late-start learners.

Part B: Qualitative Case Study Outcomes

3.3 The Readiness Gap: Curricular Inaccessibility and Literacy Barriers

Phase two interviews with secondary learners who commenced English instruction in Year 7 revealed profound systemic obstacles in acquiring core academic competencies. These challenges were not merely linguistic; rather, they represented a significant readiness gap as students navigated the transition toward higher education expectations.

3.3.1 Orthographic and Phonological Frustration

A primary emergent theme was the pervasive difficulty associated with English orthography. Participants consistently reported high levels of frustration resulting from limited prior exposure to English spelling conventions during the critical early years of schooling. One student articulated this challenge:

“I have faced spelling issues as I started to learn English... it was not easy for me to learn spelling because I had not learned before” (Participant 2, Female, Age 13).

3.3.2 Discourse-Level Writing and Comprehension Deficits

The data highlighted significant difficulties in discourse-level writing, particularly concerning the transition between Arabic and English structural conventions. These challenges were further intensified by instructional inaccessibility, where limited comprehension of teacher explanations in English created barriers to meaningful curricular engagement. One participant explained:

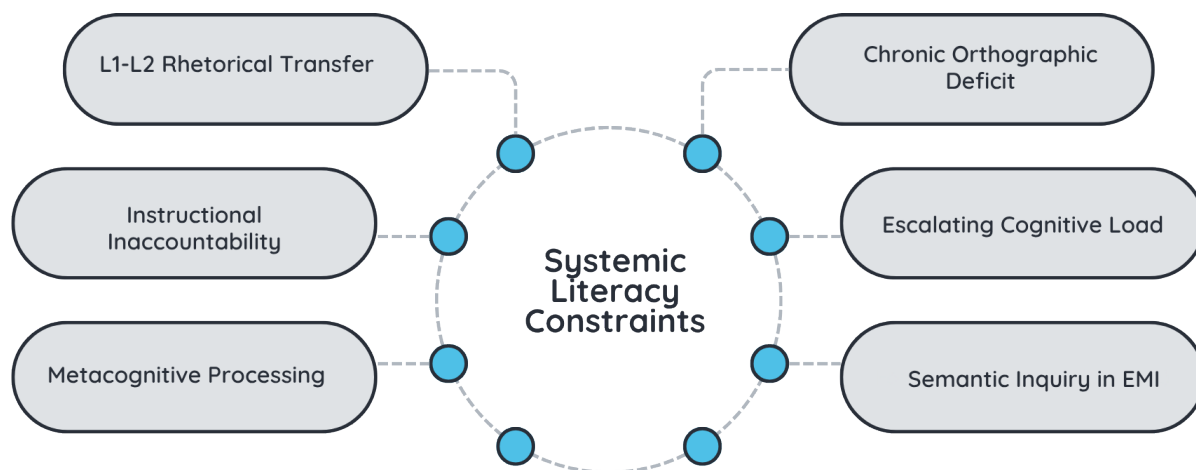
“I could not understand what the teachers were talking [about]. It was difficult for us to understand the language of the teacher and the curriculum became harder for us” (Participant 7, Male, Age 14).

3.3.3 Strategic Reading Gaps and Alternative Exposure

Regarding reading development, learners demonstrated a notable lack of metacognitive reading strategies, including summarization and inferential reasoning. These limitations restricted their ability to derive complex meanings from academic texts. Interestingly, several participants reported relying on extracurricular digital exposure, such as media consumption and social interactions, to compensate for perceived inadequacies within the school-based curriculum. As one participant reflected:

“In the beginning, it was easy for me, but it became difficult because of a change in the curriculum.... I learned much more English from Netflix and talking with neighbours and friends” (Participant 12, Female, Age 15).

Figure 4: Thematic Mapping of Systemic and Pedagogical Constraints on Core Language Skill Acquisition



3.3.4 The Affective Barrier: Communication Apprehension and L1 Socio-Pragmatic Transfer

Phase Two interviews revealed that the *late-start* trajectory creates a high affective filter, characterized by significant communication apprehension and a lack of linguistic self-efficacy. This anxiety, as illustrated in Figure 5, is a typical consequence of delayed language exposure rather than an individual deficit. Importantly, it can be minimized through practice opportunities that provide learners with low-pressure environments for language use.

3.3.5 Socio-Pragmatic Transfer and Cultural Friction

A primary challenge identified was the tendency of Year 7 learners to engage in L1 socio-pragmatic transfer, whereby they attempted to map Arabic social models onto English communicative rules. This structural and cultural friction frequently resulted in communicative failure, further diminishing learners' confidence. As one participant explained:

"I could not listen to the teacher, as I only learnt Arabic; I was shy and could not contribute to the classroom." (*Participant 5, Male, Age 13*).

3.3.6 The Self-Esteem and Anxiety Correlation

The data established a profound inverse relationship between self-esteem and foreign language anxiety. Participants described a "growing loss of confidence" that functioned as a deleterious feedback loop: low proficiency increased anxiety, which, in turn, inhibited oral participation and further impeded language development. This finding corroborates the systematic review's evidence regarding the substantial effect of blended

learning (BL) on motivation and engagement, suggesting that digital learning environments provide a "low-stakes" space in which learners can gradually rebuild their linguistic confidence.

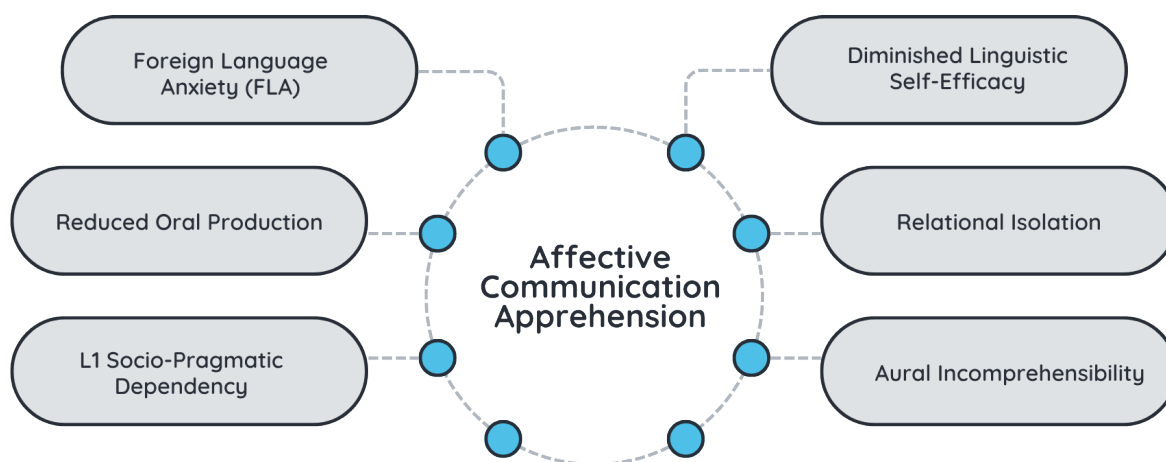
3.3.7 Insecurity and Instructional Disconnect

A recurring theme was learners' sense of relational isolation within the classroom. Participants reported feeling "not sure to ask or speak," not only because of limited vocabulary but also because of a fundamental instructional disconnect. One respondent summarized this challenge:

"We do not understand what she talks since the language was different and we were not sure to ask or speak during the English period." (*Participant 9, Female, Age 14*).

The thematic analysis revealed that Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and diminished linguistic self-efficacy constitute a symbiotic barrier to language learning. This relationship is particularly evident among students experiencing L1 socio-pragmatic dependency, in which insufficient English foundational knowledge forces learners to rely on Arabic social models during communication. These affective constraints provide further justification for the substantial effect sizes reported in the systematic review for affective outcomes ($d = 0.72$). The findings suggest that blended learning functions as a critical affective scaffold by reducing the pressure associated with real-time oral performance, while motivation and engagement emerged as the strongest and most consistent positive outcomes across the reviewed studies.

Figure 5: Conceptual Mapping of Affective Communication Barriers in Late-Start Learners



3.3.8 Analytical Commentary on Figure 5: The Affective Barrier

The conceptual mapping presented in Figure 5 illustrates how affective communication apprehension functions as a systemic consequence of delayed language acquisition rather than as an individual personality trait.

The Anxiety–Production Axis. The central nodes demonstrate that *Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)* and *Diminished Linguistic Self-Efficacy* contribute directly to *Reduced Oral Production*. This relationship suggests that students' silence in the classroom represents a defensive response to the fear of making mistakes rather than an absence of motivation.

Relational Isolation. The connection between *Aural Incomprehensibility* (i.e., not understanding the teacher) and *Relational Isolation* indicates that when students are unable to comprehend classroom discourse, they often withdraw from peer interaction to avoid social stigma.

Socio-Pragmatic Dependency. The mapping to *L1 Socio-Pragmatic Dependency* demonstrates that, in the absence of confidence in the second language (L2), students tend to rely on Arabic social models. This dependence frequently results in communicative friction within English-medium instructional environments.

3.3.9 Pedagogical Fragility: Instructional Misalignment and the Scaffolding Gap

The final emergent theme from the Phase Two interviews highlights the pedagogical fragility inherent in the transition to English instruction. Participants identified a substantial disconnect between instructional methodology and the unique learning needs of late-start learners, characterizing the classroom environment as one of instructional opacity.

3.3.10 Methodological Inaccessibility

A recurring concern was the lack of differentiated instruction to support students with minimal prior exposure to English. Participants reported that teachers frequently relied on advanced English explanations without providing the comprehensible input or instructional scaffolding necessary for novice learners. One participant explained:

"The teacher was not easy to understand... even the teacher is in a background [sic] and given no approaches that can assist him or her to teach us." (*Participant 18, Male, Age 16*).

These findings suggest that although teachers may possess strong subject-matter knowledge, they often lack the specialized digital or remedial pedagogical expertise required to address the "Year 7 Gap."

3.3.11 The Extracurricular Compensation Effect

Owing to the perceived inadequacy of school-based instruction, students reported a heavy reliance on autonomous extracurricular learning. This finding confirms the existence of a *scaffolding gap*, whereby the formal curriculum fails to provide the fundamental linguistic building blocks required for successful language development. Consequently, learners seek private tutoring, supplementary English courses, or digital learning resources to achieve functional proficiency. As one participant reflected:

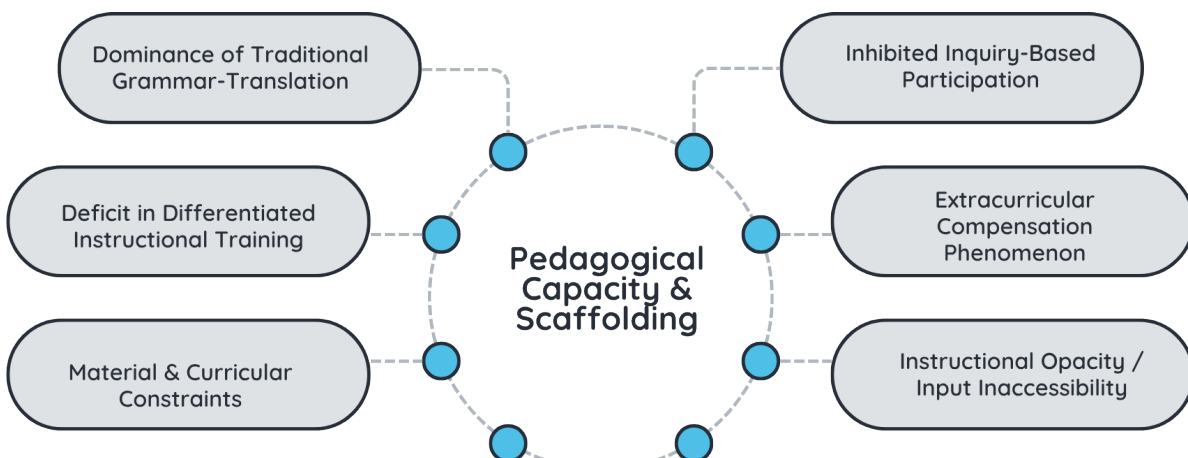
"Not all the effort on the part of teachers was sufficient... that was why she studied primarily through courses in English, which were not taught at school."
(Participant 21, Female, Age 15).

3.3.12 Cognitive Overload and Disengagement

The absence of lexical scaffolding, such as explicit explanations of unfamiliar vocabulary, frequently resulted in classroom stress and learner disengagement. Participants described experiencing cognitive overload, making it difficult to follow instructional sequences or even identify the chapters being discussed (see Figure 6). One participant stated:

"They sometimes experienced stress and the teacher did not describe the meaning of difficult words... [we had] no idea as to which chapters are being discussed."
(Participant 14, Male, Age 13).

Figure 6: Pedagogical Capacity & Instructional Scaffolding



3.3.13 Analytical Commentary on Figure 6: Pedagogical Fragility

Figure 6 illustrates the causal relationships between institutional constraints and the resulting *scaffolding gap* within the classroom.

Training and Methodology. The connection between *Deficit in Differentiated Instructional Training* and the *Dominance of Traditional Grammar-Translation* demonstrates that teachers often rely on rote instructional practices because they lack the adaptive pedagogical strategies required to support late-start learners effectively.

The Instructional Opacity Trigger. *Material and Curricular Constraints* (e.g., insufficient instructional resources) directly contribute to *Instructional Opacity*, whereby the instructional input provided to students is too linguistically complex to be comprehensible.

The Compensation Mandate. The relationship with the *Extracurricular Compensation Phenomenon* demonstrates that when *Inquiry-Based Participation* is inhibited, students are compelled to seek private or digital forms of remediation (e.g., Netflix or external English courses) to meet academic demands.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Longitudinal Impact of Delayed Acquisition on EMI Success

The findings of this study establish a critical longitudinal relationship between the timing of English language acquisition and subsequent academic performance in English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts. Specifically, the data indicate that proficiency levels developed following a Year 7 start significantly predict success in high-stakes medical assessments, including both written and oral components. These findings suggest that, for Saudi learners, English functions not merely as an academic subject but as a foundational cognitive tool for professional and academic advancement.

4.2 The "Linguistic Tax" in Higher Education

Students transitioning from state-funded secondary education into EMI environments experience what may be described as a *Linguistic Tax*. Late bilingual learners face the dual challenge of mastering complex disciplinary content while simultaneously acquiring the academic English proficiency that was not developed during earlier stages of education. Incorporating language support directly into content instruction can reduce this cognitive burden. The thematic analysis from Phase Two demonstrates that this *Linguistic Tax* manifests in two principal ways:

- **Academic Literacy Gaps.** Learners experience difficulties with critical analysis, direct academic writing, and the extensive technical reading required in higher education.
- **Relational Isolation.** Differences in oral proficiency often contribute to social fragmentation within the classroom. Students with stronger English proficiency, frequently those educated in private or international schools, may unintentionally marginalize late-start learners during collaborative learning activities, increasing learners' feelings of isolation and institutional misalignment.

4.3 Affective Erosion and the "Negative Student" Stereotype

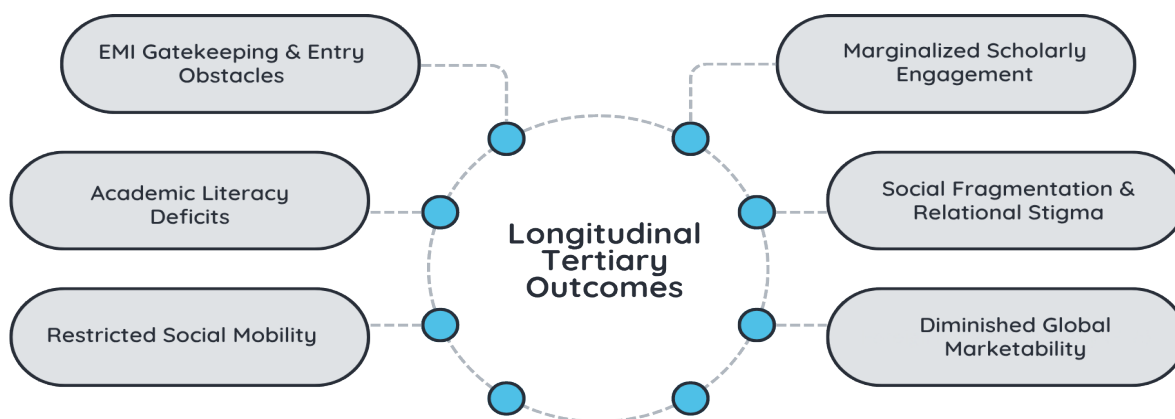
A major finding of this study is the affective erosion resulting from persistent proficiency gaps. When learners are unable to meet the immediate linguistic demands of higher education, they may internalize negative perceptions regarding their own academic ability. This erosion of linguistic self-esteem creates a deleterious feedback loop in which heightened anxiety reduces classroom participation, thereby further constraining second language (L2) development (see Figure 7).

Importantly, this affective erosion can be systematically reduced through intentionally scaffolded blended learning environments. Digital scaffolding empowers learners by separating language production from immediate peer evaluation. Recorded speaking activities, asynchronous writing tasks, and structured peer-feedback cycles transform high-stakes EMI contexts into low-stakes rehearsal environments. Such pedagogical practices not only restore linguistic self-efficacy but also align closely with the human capital objectives of Saudi Vision 2030 by fostering resilient, self-regulated learners capable of succeeding in increasingly globalized academic and professional environments.

4.4 The Extracurricular Scaffolding Mandate

The *Extracurricular Digital Compensation* phenomenon identified during the interviews serves as a functional critique of the current school-level curriculum. Learners are effectively compelled to seek additional digital and extracurricular language support to attain a minimum level of functional English proficiency. This finding provides empirical support for the systematic review presented in Part A, which reported a substantial positive effect of blended learning on learner motivation ($d = 0.72$). Because students are already relying on digital and external learning opportunities to bridge existing proficiency gaps, the institutional implementation of blended learning should be viewed not merely as an educational innovation but as a necessary remedial strategy.

Figure 7: Mapping the Cascading Longitudinal Impacts of Delayed L2 Acquisition on Tertiary Success



4.5 Analytical Commentary on Figure 7

The conceptual map presented in Figure 7 illustrates the cumulative disadvantages experienced by late-start learners throughout their educational trajectory. Beyond immediate linguistic challenges, these learners encounter EMI Gatekeeping, which contributes to Restricted Social Mobility, particularly through reduced access to competitive professional disciplines such as medicine and engineering.

Furthermore, the findings reveal substantial Social Fragmentation, whereby proficiency gaps contribute to Relational Stigma among peers and limit opportunities for meaningful academic collaboration. Over time, these challenges culminate in Diminished Global Marketability, creating a misalignment between individual learner outcomes and the broader human capital objectives of Saudi Vision 2030.

Collectively, these interconnected outcomes constitute what this study conceptualizes as the Linguistic Tax associated with delayed English language acquisition. The conceptual model therefore provides the final theoretical justification for the *Systemic Mitigation Through Blended Learning* identified in the systematic review, highlighting blended learning as a strategic intervention for reducing the long-term educational and professional consequences of delayed language acquisition.

4.6 Meta-Synthesis of Blended Learning Efficacy in the Saudi Context

This systematic review synthesized 16 empirical studies to evaluate the remedial potential of blended learning (BL) within Saudi higher education. The aggregated

evidence suggests that, although the overall impact of BL on linguistic proficiency and academic achievement is generally positive, its effectiveness is context-dependent. Specifically, its efficacy varies according to the targeted language domain, learner characteristics, and the quality of instructional design implemented within blended learning environments.

4.7 The Asymmetry of Macro-Skill Development

The findings reveal a clear asymmetry in language skill development, with blended learning (BL) interventions producing significantly greater improvements in productive skills (i.e., writing and speaking) than in receptive skills. This pattern is consistent with previous research suggesting that asynchronous learning environments, such as flipped classrooms and learning management system (LMS)-based peer review, provide learners with extended opportunities for rehearsal that are often unavailable in traditional classroom settings (Al Bataineh et al., 2019).

In contrast, the effect of BL on reading comprehension remained statistically inconclusive (Alrouji, 2020). This finding suggests the existence of a *digital literacy paradox*: although BL enhances interaction and learner engagement, it may not provide the cognitive scaffolding necessary for deep reading comprehension in a second language. Consequently, current BL practices in Saudi Arabia appear to prioritize the breadth of interaction rather than the depth of receptive processing, leaving late-start learners insufficiently prepared for reading-intensive English-medium instruction (EMI) environments.

4.8 Institutional Benefits and the Shift Toward Learner Autonomy

Beyond linguistic development, the findings demonstrate a significant pedagogical transition from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered approaches. The consistent emergence of learner autonomy as a major outcome is particularly significant within the Saudi educational context, where teacher-directed instruction has traditionally dominated English language teaching (ELT). By promoting self-directed learning and digital autonomy, BL enables students to meet the evolving educational expectations associated with Saudi Vision 2030.

Nevertheless, the institutional benefits of BL are moderated by learners' levels of digital literacy. Studies consistently associate learner disengagement with low technological self-efficacy and inadequate self-regulation (Alzahrani, 2017). These findings indicate that BL should not be viewed as a standalone technological solution. Rather, it requires an integrated instructional framework that simultaneously addresses linguistic development and digital competence.

4.9 Synthesis of Pedagogical and Affective Constraints: The Imperative for Effective Instructional Design

The systematic review demonstrates that positive learner satisfaction is closely associated with effective instructional design rather than with technology itself. Learners report favorable experiences when online learning components intentionally complement face-to-face instruction, creating a coherent and integrated learning environment (Alfahadi et al., 2015). However, these benefits are frequently constrained by institutional factors, including increased faculty workload and insufficient professional training in digital pedagogy (Al-Zumor, 2013).

4.10 Linguistic Interference and the Bottom-Up Processing Trap

The findings from the empirical phase support previous research on first language (L1) transfer in second language (L2) writing. Saudi learners frequently transfer Arabic rhetorical conventions, discourse organization, and punctuation patterns into English academic writing, creating persistent linguistic interference (Alvi & Alvi, 2019; Baykara & Ataç Aksu, 2021).

Similarly, many late-start learners rely predominantly on bottom-up reading strategies, processing texts word by word rather than constructing meaning through top-down comprehension processes (Alrabai, 2018; Eissa, 2019). The absence of metacognitive reading strategies, such as connecting supporting details with central ideas and monitoring comprehension, limits students' ability to engage effectively with complex academic texts (Ali et al., 2019).

4.11 The Affective Filter and Socio-Pragmatic Transfer

The reluctance to participate observed among late-start learners can be explained through the framework of foreign language anxiety (FLA) and its negative relationship with linguistic self-efficacy. Saudi learners frequently transfer culturally embedded communication norms from Arabic into English interactions, resulting in socio-pragmatic difficulties (Alghamdi, 2021). Elevated anxiety levels often reduce learners' willingness to communicate, discourage classroom participation, and inhibit oral language production (Baykara & Ataç Aksu, 2021; Eissa, 2019).

4.12 Systemic Challenges during the Transition to English-Medium Instruction

The transition from Arabic-medium schooling to English-medium instruction represents a substantial academic challenge. The continued reliance on Arabic as the

primary language of instruction at the school level often limits students' English proficiency before entering higher education (Khan, 2019; Qasem & Zayid, 2019). Consequently, many students seek supplementary learning opportunities outside formal schooling to compensate for deficiencies in preparation, particularly when pursuing demanding disciplines such as medicine, engineering, business, and accounting (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2016).

4.13 Relational Isolation and Academic Achievement

The combined linguistic and affective barriers experienced by late-start learners frequently result in relational and academic isolation. Compared with peers educated in private or international schools, these learners often report feelings of exclusion and reduced confidence in academic settings (Alharbi & Yakout, 2018). Their limited language proficiency also restricts participation in collaborative learning activities, thereby affecting academic performance, grade point average (GPA), and overall educational achievement (Qasem & Zayid, 2019).

4.14 Practical Implications and Policy Recommendations

The findings suggest three immediate priorities for classroom practice: (a) using blended learning technologies to scaffold speaking and writing development, (b) explicitly teaching digital reading and metacognitive comprehension strategies, and (c) establishing low-anxiety classroom environments that encourage participation among learners with varying proficiency levels.

4.15 Early Curriculum Reform

The persistent challenges experienced by Year 7 late-start learners highlight the need for structural curriculum reform. Introducing English language instruction during the primary school years would address the underlying causes of delayed language acquisition and strengthen learners' orthographic, phonological, and communicative foundations before they enter English-medium higher education.

4.16 Specialized Teacher Professional Development

The findings emphasize the importance of equipping teachers with specialized professional development that extends beyond grammar-translation approaches and promotes communicative, learner-centered instruction. Teacher training programs should focus on three areas:

- Developing affective scaffolding strategies that reduce foreign language anxiety and strengthen learners' self-efficacy.

- Implementing differentiated instructional practices that provide comprehensible input for students with diverse proficiency levels.
- Integrating digital literacy into classroom pedagogy by preparing teachers to facilitate meaningful online learning rather than simply deliver digital content.

4.17 Strategic Implementation of Blended Learning

The evidence indicates that BL represents a promising instructional approach but should not be regarded as a universal solution. Instead, successful implementation requires comprehensive pedagogical redesign supported by institutional resources.

Specifically, BL should function as a scaffolded intervention for academically underprepared learners, with particular emphasis on writing and speaking, where the strongest learning gains have been consistently reported ($d = 0.60\text{--}0.68$). Moreover, effective implementation depends upon reliable technological infrastructure, faculty preparedness, and instructional designs that align digital tools with clearly defined linguistic learning outcomes, including automated writing feedback and structured collaborative activities.

4.18 A Dual-Track Policy Framework for Saudi Vision 2030

To achieve the human capital objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, a coordinated dual-track policy framework is recommended.

1. **Macro-Level Reform:** Introduce English language education during the early years of schooling to reduce systemic readiness gaps before students enter higher education.
2. **Institutional Remediation:** Implement evidence-based blended learning models within higher education to support current cohorts of late-start learners transitioning into English-medium instruction.

Finally, sustained collaboration among school teachers, university faculty, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers is essential. Such collaboration will facilitate a coherent system of language support that enables late-start learners to progress successfully from secondary education to university while developing the linguistic competence required for academic and professional success.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the role of blended learning in addressing the language learning challenges of late-start English learners within the context of Saudi higher education. By integrating evidence from a PRISMA-guided systematic review with an empirical case study, the research demonstrated that blended learning can effectively improve productive language skills and learner motivation when supported by purposeful instructional design, adequate digital infrastructure, and faculty readiness.

The findings highlight that late-start learners encounter persistent linguistic and affective barriers that hinder their success in English-medium instruction (EMI). These challenges cannot be resolved through technology alone; instead, they require pedagogically sound blended learning practices that integrate online and face-to-face instruction. The study further argues that sustainable improvement depends on coordinated reforms across educational levels, including the earlier introduction of English in the school curriculum and the adoption of scaffolded blended learning approaches in higher education.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of how blended learning can serve as an effective instructional framework for reducing proficiency gaps and enhancing learner preparedness. By linking early language acquisition with technology-supported pedagogy, the findings offer practical guidance for educators, policymakers, and higher education institutions seeking to improve English language outcomes and support the educational goals of Saudi Vision 2030.

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