



Palestinian Students' Perceptions of Online Interaction in the Shift to Blended Learning

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Background Online interaction is a central component of blended learning, particularly in EFL contexts where opportunities for communication and engagement are essential for language development. However, limited research has examined how such interaction is experienced by students in conflict-affected higher education settings such as Palestine. **Purpose** This study aims to explore Palestinian EFL university students' perceptions of online interaction within blended learning environments, using the Community of Inquiry framework as an analytical lens. **Method** Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employed semi-structured interviews with 15 undergraduate EFL students enrolled in blended English courses at a Palestinian university. The interview data were analyzed thematically in alignment with the teaching, social, and cognitive presence dimensions of the Col framework. **Key Findings** The findings indicate that online interaction provided flexibility and opportunities for peer engagement; however, students also reported challenges related to limited instructor presence, uneven participation, and contextual constraints associated with technological infrastructure and learning conditions. Teaching presence emerged as a particularly influential factor shaping students' interactional experiences. **Implications** Given the small and context-specific sample, the findings offer exploratory insights rather than generalizable conclusions. The study contributes to a contextualized understanding of online interaction in blended EFL learning and highlights the need for purposeful instructional design and sustained teaching presence in similar higher education contexts.

Keywords: Blended learning, EFL learners, higher education institutions, online interaction, students' perceptions.

فهم الطلبة الفلسطينيين للتفاعل عبر الإنترنت عند الانتقال من التعليم التقليدي إلى التعليم المدمج في مؤسسات التعليم العالي

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الخلفية. يُعدّ التفاعل عبر الإنترنت مكوناً أساسياً في التعلّم المدمج، ولا سيما في سياقات تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كـ لغة أجنبية، حيث تُعدّ فرص التواصل والمشاركة ضرورية لتنمية المهارات اللغوية. ومع ذلك، لا تزال الأبحاث التي تتناول كيفية اختبار الطلبة لهذا النوع من التفاعل في مؤسسات التعليم العالي المتأثرة بالنزاعات، مثل فلسطين، محدودة. **الهدف** تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف تصورات طلبة الجامعات الفلسطينية الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كـ لغة أجنبية حول التفاعل عبر الإنترنت في بيئات التعلّم المدمج، وذلك بالاستناد إلى إطار مجتمع الاستقصاء بوصفه إطاراً تحليلياً. **المنهجية.** اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج النوعي، حيث تم إجراء مقابلات شبه منظمة مع 15 طالباً وطالبة من مرحلة البكالوريوس المتحقّين بمساقات اللغة الإنجليزية المدمجة في إحدى الجامعات الفلسطينية. وتم تحليل بيانات المقابلات تحليلاً موضوعياً بما يتوافق مع أبعاد إطار مجتمع الاستقصاء الثلاثة: الحضور التعليمي، والحضور الاجتماعي، والحضور المعرفي. **النتائج الرئيسية.** أظهرت النتائج أن التفاعل عبر الإنترنت أتاح قدرًا من المرونة ووفر فرصاً للتفاعل بين الأقران، إلا أن الطلبة أشاروا أيضاً إلى تحديات تتعلق بضعف الحضور التعليمي، وتفاوت مستويات المشاركة، والقيود السياقية المرتبطة بالبنية التحتية التكنولوجية وظروف التعلّم. وقد برز الحضور التعليمي بوصفه عاملاً مؤثراً بشكل خاص في تشكيل تجارب الطلبة التفاعلية. **التداعيات.** نظراً لصغر حجم العينة وطبيعتها السياقية المحدودة، تقدّم النتائج رؤى استكشافية لا يمكن تعميمها. وتسهم الدراسة في تعميق الفهم السياقي للتفاعل عبر الإنترنت في التعلّم المدمج لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كـ لغة أجنبية، كما تبرز أهمية التصميم التعليمي الهادف واستمرارية الحضور التعليمي في سياقات التعليم العالي المماثلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم المدمج، التفاعل عبر الإنترنت، مؤسسات التعليم العالي، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كـ لغة أجنبية، تصورات الطلاب

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Background

Blended learning, commonly defined as the purposeful integration of face-to-face instruction with online learning components, has become an increasingly prominent model in higher education worldwide (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Advances in digital technologies and growing demands for flexibility have positioned blended learning as a means of extending learning beyond physical classrooms while maintaining pedagogical continuity. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), blended learning is associated with increased learner autonomy, opportunities for extended practice, and enhanced interaction through integrated online and face-to-face activities (Means, 2009).

Interaction is widely recognized as a central component of second language acquisition. Interactionist theories emphasize that language development is facilitated through opportunities to negotiate meaning, receive feedback, and produce modified output during communicative exchanges (Gass, 2006; Long, 1996). Similarly, sociocultural theory conceptualizes language learning as a socially mediated process that occurs through collaborative activity and dialogic interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Xu & Zhang, 2019). Within blended learning environments, interaction is therefore not merely a supplementary feature but a foundational pedagogical process that shapes learners' engagement and linguistic development.

To conceptualize interaction in online and blended contexts, this study draws on the

Community of Inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). The CoI framework posits that meaningful learning emerges through the dynamic interaction of social (Czerniewicz et al., 2020) presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. Research grounded in the Community of Inquiry framework demonstrates that the quality of online interaction is strongly influenced by instructional design, facilitation strategies, and the extent to which learners experience a sense of social connection and shared purpose (Garrison, 2016; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). In EFL contexts, where affective factors and communicative confidence play a critical role, the balance among these presences becomes particularly significant.

In Palestine, the adoption of blended learning in higher education is shaped by contextual conditions that extend beyond pedagogical considerations. Palestinian universities operate under ongoing political instability, restrictions on movement, and periodic disruptions to on-campus instruction, which have made flexible learning models a practical necessity (UNESCO, 2021). Although internet access in Palestine has expanded in recent years, empirical data indicate persistent challenges related to connection stability, bandwidth quality, and equitable access to digital devices. According to the (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023), significant disparities remain across regions, directly affecting students' ability to engage consistently in synchronous online interaction.

Teacher preparedness is a key factor influencing the effectiveness of blended learning implementation. Evidence from Palestinian educational contexts suggests that many instructors lack adequate training in digital pedagogy and experience challenges in integrating technology into their teaching practices (Subaih, Sabbah, & Al-Duais, 2021). Consequently, the use of online components tends to be limited to content transmission rather than facilitating interactive and collaborative learning experiences. This limitation is particularly critical in EFL contexts, where sustained interaction is essential for the development of communicative competence consequently, online components were often used primarily for content delivery rather than for fostering meaningful interaction and collaborative learning. These limitations are particularly consequential in EFL courses, where interaction is central to developing communicative competence.

Student perceptions reflect the interaction between these contextual and pedagogical constraints. While Palestinian students acknowledge the flexibility and accessibility afforded by blended learning, yet report challenges related to engagement and interaction, particularly in online components (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021; Shraim, 2015). Such findings suggest that technological access alone does not guarantee effective learning; rather, students' experiences are mediated by instructional practices, teacher presence, and the broader socio-political context.

Despite the growing body of research on blended learning in higher education, limited attention has been paid to students' perceptions of online interaction as a pedagogical process in EFL contexts, particularly within conflict-affected settings such as Palestine. Existing studies have largely focused on general attitudes toward e-learning or technological adoption, often without explicit theoretical grounding. Moreover, few qualitative studies have employed the Community of Inquiry framework to examine how online interaction is experienced and interpreted by EFL learners.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores Palestinian university EFL students' perceptions of online interaction within blended learning environments. By adopting a qualitative approach and situating the analysis within the Community of Inquiry framework, the study seeks to provide a theoretically informed and context-sensitive understanding of how online interaction is facilitated, constrained, and experienced in Palestinian higher education.

Research Questions

1. How do Palestinian EFL university students conceptualize online interaction within blended learning environments?
2. What factors facilitate or constrain students' online interaction in blended learning contexts?

Literature Review

Interaction and Language Learning

Interaction has long been recognized as a fundamental mechanism in second language development. Interactionist theories argue that conversational interaction promotes language acquisition by drawing learners' attention to linguistic form and meaning through feedback, clarification requests, and negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996). Empirical research supports this claim, demonstrating that interactional opportunities contribute to improved accuracy, fluency, and pragmatic competence (Gass, 2006).

From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is viewed as a socially mediated process that occurs through participation in meaningful activities with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Interaction provides learners with scaffolding, collaborative dialogue, and opportunities to internalize linguistic knowledge (Lantolf, Poehner, & Swain, 2018). These theoretical perspectives highlight that interaction is not merely a supplementary feature of language instruction but a central condition for learning.

Blended Learning and Online Interaction in EFL Contexts

Recent studies suggest that blended learning can enhance EFL learning when online interaction is intentionally structured. (Lin, 2015) found that blended environments allowed learners to extend language practice beyond classroom time and engage more

reflectively with content. Similarly, (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020) reported that synchronous online sessions supported communicative practice when instructors actively facilitated interaction.

Communication in online learning can be hindered by the absence of traditional non-verbal cues, which play an important role in social interaction in face-to-face contexts. In asynchronous, text-based environments, electronic non-verbal cues such as timing of responses, formatting, and visual symbols convey meaning beyond written words; when these cues are absent or interpreted as inattentive (e.g., delayed feedback or lack of interaction), learners may feel disconnected, less confident, and less willing to participate (Al Tawil, 2019). These challenges highlight the importance of intentional pedagogical design and instructor presence in online components.

Online Interaction and the Community of Inquiry Framework

In online and blended learning environments, interaction has been extensively examined through the Community of Inquiry framework. Garrison et al. (1999) propose that meaningful learning emerges through the dynamic interaction of three presences. Social presence refers to learners' ability to present themselves as real and emotionally engaged participants. Teaching presence involves instructional design, facilitation, and feedback. Cognitive presence reflects learners' engagement in constructing meaning through sustained reflection and dialogue.

Research applying the CoI framework in language learning contexts indicates that social presence is particularly critical for encouraging participation and reducing anxiety among EFL learners (Stickler & Hampel, 2015). Teaching presence, especially clear task design and timely feedback, has been shown to directly influence students' perceptions of interaction quality and learning effectiveness (Garrison, 2016). Cognitive presence, meanwhile, depends on the extent to which online tasks require meaningful engagement rather than superficial participation.

Blended Learning in Conflict-Affected Contexts

In conflict-affected and low-resource settings, blended learning has been widely adopted as a pragmatic solution to ensure educational continuity. (Czerniewicz et al., 2020) argue that while digital learning offers flexibility, it often exacerbates existing inequalities related to access, infrastructure, and digital literacy. (Al-Fraihat, Joy, Masa'deh, & Sinclair, 2020) similarly emphasize that institutional readiness and support are key determinants of e-learning success.

Studies conducted in Palestinian higher education report comparable findings. Shraim & Crompton, (2015) highlight infrastructural challenges and inconsistent implementation practices, which affect students' engagement and satisfaction. However, these studies tend to focus on technological adoption rather than the

interactional experiences that shape learning processes, particularly in language education.

Research Gap

Although blended learning has been widely studied, limited research has explored how EFL students in conflict-affected contexts perceive and experience online interaction specifically. Furthermore, few qualitative studies have employed an explicit theoretical framework to interpret these experiences. The present study addresses this gap by offering a theory-informed qualitative analysis of Palestinian EFL students' perceptions of online interaction within blended learning environments.

Method

Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore Palestinian university students' perceptions of online interaction within blended learning environments. A qualitative approach is appropriate when the aim is to gain in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, meanings, and interpretations, rather than to measure variables quantitatively (Campillos, 2010; Ishtiaq, 2019). Given the exploratory nature of this study and the contextual specificity of Palestinian higher education, qualitative inquiry allowed for a nuanced examination of interactional practices that cannot be captured through survey-based methods alone.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Palestinian EFL university students conceptualize and

experience online interaction in blended learning environments?

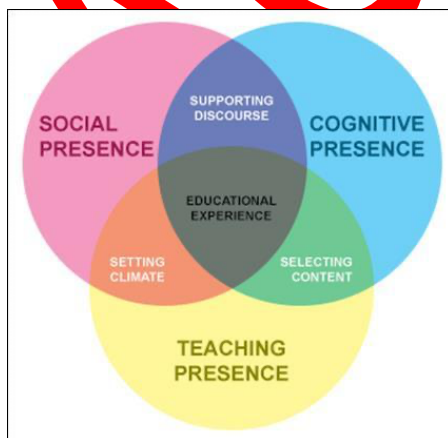
2. What factors facilitate or hinder effective online interaction in blended learning contexts in Palestinian higher education?

Theoretical Framework

The study is theoretically grounded in the Community of Inquiry framework, which conceptualizes meaningful learning in online and blended environments as the intersection of social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). The framework has been widely applied in higher education research to examine how interaction supports learning processes in technology-mediated environments (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010).

The CoI framework informed the development of the interview questions, the analytical coding process, and the interpretation of findings, ensuring theoretical coherence throughout the study.

Figure 1: *Theoretical Framework*



Study Population and Setting

The participants were fifteen English major students, consisting of seven males and eight females aged 21-30. The research is implemented throughout the second term of 2022-2023 and this age group represents undergraduate students with sufficient academic maturity to reflect critically on their learning experiences and to evaluate interactional practices within blended learning environments. This population comprises undergraduate university students in their early and middle academic years, with varying levels of experience in technology-mediated learning who possess varied technology experiences and experiences with modern learning tools, important for the study. The study participants were students in the English Department at Arab American University in Palestine. Participants were purposively sampled because of qualifications and their experiences with online communication and blended learning systems. This approach also helped to select informants as case studies with all the information needed for this study.

This study adopted a qualitative design aimed at gaining in-depth insight into students' perceptions of online interaction rather than measuring prevalence or generalizability. Accordingly, a small, information-rich sample was appropriate. Previous qualitative research indicates that thematic saturation in interview-based studies often occurs within 12–15 participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The decision not to employ a survey was deliberate, as surveys are limited in

capturing the nuanced meanings, experiences, and contextual factors that shape interaction in blended EFL learning environments (van Der Stap, van den Bogaart, Rahimi, & Versendaal, 2024). The purpose of the study was exploratory and interpretive, not statistical generalization.

Instrument Development

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of 12 open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviewing was selected because it allows researchers to maintain focus on key constructs while enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words (Kvale, 2009).

The interview questions were informed by prior qualitative and theory-driven studies on online interaction and blended learning, particularly research grounded in the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, Archer, & education, 1999; Shea & Bidjerano, 2012) and studies examining learner–instructor and learner–learner interaction in online and blended EFL contexts (Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Schroder, 2013; Stickler & Hampel, 2015). The questions were subsequently adapted to suit the Palestinian EFL higher education context, taking into account contextual constraints identified in previous research (Shraim, 2015). Rather than adopting standardized interview instruments, the study employed open-ended, theory-informed questions in line with qualitative interview principles (Ishtiaq, 2019; Kvale, 2009). Questions were designed to elicit perceptions related to:

- Social presence (e.g., sense of connection and peer interaction),
- Teaching presence (e.g., instructor guidance, feedback, and course organization),
- Cognitive presence (e.g., engagement, reflection, and learning processes).

Data Collection Tool

The data were collected with semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants to share their original thoughts, and also let the researcher go further into the subject. The interview guide consisted of 12 open questions distributed among three central themes:

Perceptions of interacting online in blended learning (e.g., “How comfortable are you speaking to your instructor or classmates online?”).

Attitudes towards and problems with communication (e.g.: “What advantages and disadvantages are there to communicating through the Internet?”).

Factors mediating participation (e.g., “Why do and why don’t you use computer mediated language?”).

The interview questions were first developed in English and then translated to Arabic to ensure a comprehensible reflection of questions. The interviews were conducted in Arabic because this the first language of the participants and later transcribed into English and translated for analysis.

Although the data were collected in 2022, their analytical value remains intact because the study focuses on interactional processes, learner perceptions, and pedagogical dynamics rather than on specific digital tools. Qualitative research does not lose relevance with technological change when it examines underlying social and instructional practices (Maxwell, 2010). In this sense, the findings offer a pre-artificial intelligence baseline for understanding online interaction in blended EFL contexts, which can serve as a point of comparison for future post-AI studies. As argued by (Braun & Clarke, 2019), historically situated qualitative data can generate theoretically meaningful insights when appropriately contextualized and when claims are bounded by the time of data collection.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, this study applied the qualitative research criteria of credibility, dependability, and conformability, following the trustworthiness framework described by (Forero et al., 2018). Credibility was enhanced through theory-driven interview questions aligned with the Community of Inquiry framework, which allowed for focused exploration of teaching, social, and cognitive presence. Dependability was supported by maintaining a systematic audit trail of data collection and analysis. Conformability was ensured by grounding interpretations in participants' responses and triangulating data to minimize researcher bias. Credibility was enhanced through the

use of theory-driven interview questions aligned with the Community of Inquiry framework, allowing for focused exploration of teaching, social, and cognitive presence. The interview protocol was reviewed by two experts in applied linguistics and educational technology and piloted with two students to ensure clarity and relevance. Dependability was supported through a transparent documentation of the data collection and analysis procedures, while conformability was addressed by maintaining an audit trail and grounding interpretations in participants' verbatim responses. Although the sample consisted of 15 participants, this size was deemed sufficient for thematic saturation in qualitative inquiry, as the aim was to generate in-depth, context-sensitive insights rather than statistically generalizable findings.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was selected for its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, review, and refinement.

The coding process was both theory-informed, guided by the Community of Inquiry framework, and data-driven, allowing themes to emerge inductively while remaining conceptually grounded (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Results

The findings are reported using the two RQs. Five major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the data collected through 15 semi-structured interviews. Also included are frequencies indicating the degree to which each theme was manifested.

RQ1: How do Palestinian EFL university students conceptualize online interaction within blended learning environments?

Theme 1: Easy Access and Flexibility

Participants frequently described online interaction within blended learning as characterized by ease of access to materials and flexibility in managing learning activities. Students emphasized the convenience of having course resources centralized and accessible at any time, which allowed them to progress at their own pace. One participant noted, *“Blended learning was easy for us to get used to because we are a tech-savvy generation”* (S10), illustrating how digital familiarity shaped positive perceptions of online interaction.

Similarly, another student explained, *“This exam is easy to do, you just have to click next. It’s all organized in one place”* (S2), highlighting how structured digital environments facilitated task completion. These comments suggest that students associated online interaction with efficiency and reduced cognitive load, particularly in comparison to traditional paper-based processes. In addition, flexibility was perceived as a practical advantage under challenging circumstances, as reflected in the

statement, *“It saved me time and effort, especially when transportation was difficult”* (S9). Collectively, these accounts suggest that students primarily conceptualized online interaction as a logistical support mechanism rather than as a space for sustained communicative or collaborative engagement.

Theme 2: Preference for In-person Contact

Despite acknowledging the benefits of flexibility, many participants expressed a clear preference for face-to-face interaction with instructors and peers. Students emphasized that physical presence enhanced motivation, confidence, and engagement, particularly in relation to oral communication tasks. As one participant stated, *“I’m faced with the teacher and it motivates me to study”* (S3), suggesting that direct interaction reinforced accountability and emotional connection.

Another student described in-person interaction as having *“a deeper spiritual dimension in learning”* (S13), pointing to affective and relational aspects that were perceived as absent in online settings. Similarly, *“When I look at my fellow classmates, then it makes me partake more than just staying on my own”* (S8) illustrates how visual and social cues encouraged participation. These responses indicate that while students recognized the practical advantages of online interaction, they perceived face-to-face communication as more effective for fostering engagement, especially in language learning contexts where confidence and immediacy are critical.

RQ2: What factors facilitate or constrain students' online interaction in blended learning contexts?

Theme 3: Inadequate information and organization (9 of 15 participants)

A substantial number of participants reported that unclear instructions, inconsistent workload expectations, and delayed feedback negatively affected their engagement in online interaction. One student explained, *"I've had one assignment that's taken me an hour, and I've had another assignment that's taken me five hours and a half. It was hard to plan my time,"* illustrating how inconsistency in task design created uncertainty and frustration.

Another participant stated, *"The instructions regarding assignments are often unclear... especially the lack of examples"*, highlighting the absence of guidance needed to support independent online work. Delayed feedback further exacerbated disengagement, as reflected in the comment, *"Why on earth do instructors have so little time to provide feedback?"* This frustration suggests that insufficient teaching presence undermined students' confidence and willingness to participate. Overall, this theme indicates that poor organization and limited instructional clarity acted as significant barriers to meaningful online interaction.

Theme 4: Time management and self-regulatory difficulties.

While flexibility was generally viewed positively, participants also described it as a source of difficulty due to challenges

in self-regulation. Several students admitted that the absence of strict deadlines encouraged procrastination and reduced motivation. As one participant noted, *"If you're not motivated, it's so easy to do nothing"* (S4), reflecting how autonomy without structure hindered engagement.

Another student emphasized the need for clearer benchmarks, stating, *"I need tighter deadlines and yardsticks for my progress"* (S6). Similarly, *"It was easy to leave things until the last minute"* (S2) illustrates how flexibility became counterproductive in the absence of external regulation. These findings suggest that online interaction requires not only access and autonomy but also structured support to promote sustained participation.

Theme 5: Flexibility as a Benefit in a Conflict Situation (8 of 15 participants)

Participants strongly emphasized that flexibility was not merely a convenience but a necessity within the Palestinian context. Students linked their appreciation of blended learning to the instability of daily life under conflict conditions. One participant explained, *"We are all dwelling in an unsafe atmosphere... under these conditions, blended education is the best answer"* (S12), highlighting the role of blended learning in ensuring educational continuity.

Others described emotional and cognitive benefits associated with studying from home. For example, *"I liked to study at my home; I was more calm and learnt better"* (S14) suggests that physical safety and psychological comfort supported learning.

Similarly, “*When everything outside is still unknown, the best way to study is from home*” (S15) underscores how contextual uncertainty shaped students’ perceptions of online interaction. This theme demonstrates that flexibility functioned as an adaptive response to structural constraints rather than a purely pedagogical preference.

Table (1): Summary of Themes and Frequency of Mentions (N = 15)

Research Questions	Theme	No. of Participants
RQ1: Comprehension	Easy Access and Flexibility	12
	Preference for Physical Interaction	10
RQ2: Factors	Lack of Clear Information & Organization	9
	Time Management & Self-Regulation Challenges	11
	Adaptability as an Advantage	8

Table (2): Initial Codes from Thematic Analysis

Research Question (RQ)	Theme	Initial Codes (examples)
RQ1: How do Palestinian EFL university students conceptualize online interaction within blended learning environments?	Theme 1: Easy Access and Flexibility (12/15)	- Easy access to tasks and materials - One-stop platform for resources - Self-paced learning - Flexibility in conflict areas - Tech-savvy generation adaptation
	Theme 2: Preference for In-person Contact (10/15)	- Preference for face-to-face meetings - Increased confidence and motivation with teacher/classmates - Oral tasks easier in person - Spiritual/deeper meaning in face-to-face interaction

RQ2: 2. What factors facilitate or constrain students’ online interaction in blended learning contexts?	Theme 3: Inadequate Information and Organization (9/15)	- Confusing instructions - Inconsistent module lengths - Lack of timely feedback - Difficulty organizing time - Need for more samples
	Theme 4: Time Management and Self-regulatory Difficulties (11/15)	- Procrastination due to flexibility - Lack of motivation without deadlines - Desire for stricter deadlines - Need for progress markers

Overall, the findings reveal how Palestinian EFL university students conceptualize and experience online interaction within blended learning environments and identify the factors shaping these experiences. In response to RQ1, Themes 1 and 2 show that students primarily understood online interaction in terms of accessibility and flexibility while simultaneously expressing a strong preference for face-to-face communication. Addressing RQ2, Themes 3 and 4 highlight instructional organization, clarity, and time management as key factors that constrained students’ online interaction. Theme 5 further illustrates how contextual conditions related to conflict influenced students’ reliance on flexibility as an enabling feature of blended learning. Together, these five themes provide a descriptive account of students’ perceptions and experiences of online interaction within blended EFL courses.

Discussion

This study explored Palestinian EFL students’ perceptions of online interaction within blended learning environments, with particular attention to the affordances and constraints shaping their engagement. The findings are discussed here through the lens

of the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, Archer, et al., 1999), which conceptualizes meaningful learning as the intersection of social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. Interpreting the results through this framework enables a deeper understanding of how interaction operates in blended EFL contexts, particularly within a conflict-affected educational setting.

Social Presence and the Preference for Face-to-Face Interaction

The strong preference expressed by participants for in-person interaction highlights the central role of social presence in blended EFL learning. Social presence refers to learners' ability to project themselves as "real people" and to establish interpersonal relationships that support communication and engagement (Garrison, Anderson, Archer, et al., 1999). In the present study, students associated face-to-face interaction with increased confidence, motivation, and emotional comfort, particularly during oral activities such as presentations. These findings suggest that online interaction alone did not sufficiently support the relational and affective dimensions of language learning.

While previous research has reported similar student preferences for face-to-face components in blended learning, the current findings extend this literature by situating social presence within the Palestinian context. In environments characterized by political instability and uncertainty, interpersonal contact appears to play a

compensatory role, offering emotional reassurance in addition to pedagogical support. This finding challenges technologically deterministic assumptions that online interaction can fully substitute in-person engagement and underscores the importance of context-sensitive blended learning designs.

Teaching Presence, Instructional Organization, and Online Engagement

Participants' frustration with unclear instructions, inconsistent workload, and delayed feedback points to limitations in teaching presence, defined as the design, facilitation, and direction of learning processes (Garrison et al., 2010). Although blended learning is often praised for its flexibility, the findings indicate that flexibility without clear instructional structure may hinder rather than enhance engagement. Students reported difficulty managing tasks when expectations were ambiguous, suggesting that effective online interaction depends heavily on intentional pedagogical design rather than technological access alone.

These findings complicate prior research that presents flexibility as an unqualified advantage of blended learning. Instead, they suggest that teaching presence plays a mediating role in determining whether flexibility supports or undermines learning. In the absence of timely feedback and transparent task design, students may disengage from online interaction, particularly in language learning contexts where guidance and scaffolding are essential

Cognitive Presence, Self-Regulation, and Learning Challenges

Difficulties related to time management and self-regulation can be interpreted through the concept of cognitive presence, which emphasizes learners' capacity to construct meaning through sustained reflection and engagement. Participants' accounts revealed that while flexible scheduling was appreciated, it often led to procrastination and reduced academic discipline, especially in courses lacking firm deadlines. This tension suggests that cognitive presence was not consistently sustained across learning tasks.

In contrast to studies conducted in more stable educational contexts, where blended learning has been associated with enhanced learner autonomy, the present findings indicate that autonomy may require additional scaffolding in conflict-affected settings. The instability surrounding students' daily lives appears to limit their capacity to maintain consistent cognitive engagement without structured support. This finding contributes to blended learning theory by highlighting the contextual conditions under which cognitive presence may be constrained.

Flexibility and Blended Learning in a Conflict-Affected Context

Importantly, participants' positive perceptions of flexibility cannot be understood independently of the broader sociopolitical context. For Palestinian students, flexibility was not merely a matter of convenience but a necessity that enabled

educational continuity amid disruptions related to mobility restrictions and security concerns. This contextualized understanding extends existing blended learning models, which often assume stable learning environments, by demonstrating that pedagogical effectiveness is shaped by structural conditions beyond institutional control. Taken together, the findings suggest that blended learning in EFL contexts should not be evaluated solely in terms of technological affordances. Rather, its effectiveness depends on the dynamic interaction between social, teaching, and cognitive presences, all of which are influenced by contextual realities. By integrating students' lived experiences with established theoretical frameworks, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of online interaction in blended learning environments within conflict-affected settings.

Beyond corroborating existing blended learning research, the findings of this study highlight how contextual conditions in Palestinian higher education shape students' experiences of online interaction. Limited infrastructural reliability, constrained learning environments, and heightened reliance on instructor guidance appear to intensify the importance of teaching presence within blended EFL courses. From a CoI perspective, this suggests that models of blended learning developed in stable contexts may require contextual adaptation to account for structural and sociopolitical constraints. Rather than viewing online interaction as universally enabling, the findings underscore the need to examine how presence is enacted differently across settings, thereby extending

the interpretive scope of the CoI framework in conflict-affected educational contexts.

Implications for Models of Blended Learning

When considered collectively, the results indicate that a rebalancing of the Community of Inquiry presences is necessary for successful blended learning in EFL contexts, especially in settings impacted by conflict. Beyond simply delivering content, teaching presence needs to incorporate structured interactional tasks, consistent feedback, and clear guidance. It is important to purposefully promote social presence through opportunities for spoken communication, cooperative activities, and synchronous interaction. In order to encourage sustained engagement, cognitive presence in turn depends on matching flexibility with organized support. This study advances a more sophisticated understanding of how blended learning functions in limited contexts by clearly connecting students' experiences to the CoI framework. The results emphasize the need for context-sensitive designs that prioritize interaction as a fundamental element of EFL instruction rather than treating blended learning as a uniform pedagogical solution.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted of 15 students from a single Palestinian university, which limits the transferability of the findings to other institutional or national contexts. Second, the data were collected in 2022; therefore, the

findings reflect students' experiences during a specific phase of post-pandemic blended learning rather than current AI-enhanced instructional environments. Third, the study relied solely on self-reported interview data, which may be influenced by participants' subjective perceptions. These limitations were addressed through careful contextualization of claims and a qualitative design focused on depth rather than breadth. Future research could employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to examine how online interaction evolves in rapidly changing technological contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined Palestinian university EFL students' perceptions of online interaction within blended learning environments, with particular attention to how interaction is understood and what contextual and pedagogical factors shape it. Drawing on a qualitative approach and informed by the Community of Inquiry framework, the study provides a theory-driven and context-sensitive account of online interaction in a conflict-affected higher education setting. While the data were collected in 2022, the study is positioned as a context-specific qualitative inquiry that captures a transitional phase in the adoption of blended learning in Palestinian higher education, offering analytically relevant insights into interactional dynamics rather than time-bound technological practices.

Rather than viewing blended learning as a uniformly effective pedagogical model, the findings highlight the conditional nature of online interaction. Students valued

flexibility and accessibility, especially under conditions of political instability; however, meaningful interaction was constrained when teaching presence and social presence were insufficiently developed. These findings underscore that interaction in blended EFL courses is not guaranteed by technological access alone but depends on intentional instructional design, sustained facilitation, and opportunities for socially situated communication.

The study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it foregrounds students' perspectives on online interaction as a pedagogical process rather than treating interaction as a secondary or technical feature of blended learning. Second, by applying the Community of Inquiry framework, the study demonstrates the analytical value of examining the balance among social, teaching, and cognitive presence in understanding students' engagement in blended EFL contexts. Third, the study extends research on blended learning in conflict-affected settings by showing how flexibility functions simultaneously as a mechanism for educational continuity and a source of pedagogical tension. Overall, the findings suggest that effective blended learning in EFL higher education—particularly in constrained and conflict-affected contexts—requires a shift from access-oriented implementations toward intentionally designed, interaction-centered pedagogical models. By emphasizing the centrality of interaction and theoretical coherence, this study offers insights that can inform future

research and pedagogical practice without overstating its scope or generalizability.

Disclosure Statement

The authors state that they do not have any applicable or material financial interest pertaining to the research study presented in the present paper.

AI Disclosure Statement: The artificial intelligence tools were limited to language editing and making it easier to comprehend, style-wise, grammatically, and structurally. No generative AI tools were used to generate and study the research material. The author fully assumes the originality, accuracy and integrity of the final work.

Ethical approval and consent to take part: Ethical Factors to be considered.

Consent: Before the participants participated in the FGIs, they signed informed consent forms.

Confidentiality: It was assured that the participants would not have their identities and responses disclosed, and all data were anonymized.

Voluntary Participation: The participants were informed that they had the freedom of leaving at any time and without paying any fee.

Access to data and materials: The data sets utilized and/or analyzed in the study can be accessed by the respective author at a reasonable request.

Appendix A: Participant Introduction to the Interview Guide

We appreciate your willingness to participate

in this research. This interview's goal is to learn more about your opinions and experiences with online communication in blended learning settings. All answers will be kept private and used exclusively for research. Any question can be skipped, and you can stop at any moment.

Questions for an Interview

Section 1: How Students View Online Communication

1-What are your thoughts on interacting with peers and teachers virtually?

2-What distinctions do you see between online and in-person interactions?

3-What, in your opinion, makes online communication beneficial or detrimental to your academic pursuits?

Section 2: Benefits and Difficulties

4. What are the primary advantages of blended learning that you have experienced?

5. What obstacles or problems did you run into when interacting online?

6. Do you believe that these difficulties had an impact on your academic achievement? How?

Section 3: Elements That Affect Participation

7. What drives you to engage in active online communication?

8. What discourages you from taking part or interacting?

9. Is it easier or harder for you to participate online depending on your surroundings (home, internet, and university facilities)?

Open Question

10. Is there any other experience or comment you would like to add regarding online interaction in blended learning?

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