

Investigating the utility of blended learning in the EFL classroom in Moroccan vocational training institutions: A case study of Altissia platform usage

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Abstract

The current paper aimed to investigate the utility of blended learning in the context of EFL education at the level of vocational training institutions through exploring Moroccan vocational trainees' experiences of learning English in a blended learning environment via a language learning platform called Altissia. More specifically, the study first examined the extent of use and effectiveness of this method to study English from the trainees' point of view. The study explored the barriers that impeded their utilization of this platform and the impacts of those barriers on their English language learning experience. A mixed-methods approach was used, making use of both a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Using convenience sampling, 113 trainees studying English as a complementary course at a public vocational training (OFPPT) institution were targeted to gather quantitative data, and 9 of them took part in the semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that although most respondents agreed on the usefulness of the Altissia platform in improving their English language learning experience, their frequency of use was infrequent and temporary. The study also revealed that the barriers that they faced were platform-related barriers and personal barriers, which both had an impact on their use of the platform and overall experience of blended learning. This study addresses a gap in the literature as no previous studies investigate blended learning and the use of Altissia as a learning management system platform dedicated for delivering the online part of the blended experience in the context of Moroccan vocational training.

Keywords: blended learning, vocational training, EFL education, EFL learning, online learning.

1. Introduction

Due to Covid 19, education systems worldwide have witnessed an emergent shift into the integration and use of blended learning to guarantee an effective delivery of its courses and modules including those related to English as a foreign language teaching and learning. This shift has become the ‘new normal’ in many institutions and disciplines (Platonova et al., 2022). Vocational training institutions in Morocco are no exception as they have become a leading example in adopting information and communication technology (ICT) tools and applications to enhance their blended learning environment. Opting for such technological-oriented approaches and combining them with traditional face-to-face approaches for the purpose of language teaching and learning is considered as a pedagogical factor in education (Rahim, 2019). Moreover, the increased utilization of blended learning is greatly influencing the outcomes and future directions of educational settings (Dziuban et al., 2018).

For the learners, they can utilize this method to improve their foreign language learning in a more flexible and efficient manner through combining personal face-to-face classroom learning experiences with online learning experiences (Kholifa et al., 2020). Especially since the technologies used in education have drastically advanced (Munro et al., 2018) to cater for the learners’ needs to get beyond the constraints of traditional classroom settings (Cao, 2023). Furthermore, and more importantly, in today’s digitalized world it has become a necessity for learners to use ICT for their own advantage as they have “a high capacity on using the high technology as an inseparable part of their education and work” (Yalçınkaya, 2015).

However, although research has indicated that blended learning positively influences EFL education as it can promote academic achievement of learners through providing a flexible language learning platform (Rahim, 2019), some learners still face many barriers that influence their use of this language learning approach. Additionally, in the Moroccan vocational training context, there is a scarcity of research on trainees’ learning experiences of English in blended learning, particularly using a technology-assisted language learning system. Hence, blended learning for English teaching and learning is considered newly introduced in the context where this reported research was conducted, and so is research on this educational approach. In this research, blended learning was implemented in their course using an online platform called Altissia.

1.1. Research Objectives and Questions

The current study aimed to investigate the utility of blended learning for vocationally oriented EFL language learning among vocational trainees through investigating their frequency of use of an e-learning management system called Altissia. The study also aimed to identify the barriers that impeded the trainees' utilization of this platform and the impacts of these barriers on the trainees' English language learning experience. On that account, the study focused on the following questions:

- To what extent do vocational trainees use the Altissia platform to improve their English language learning experience?
- To what extent do vocational trainees believe the Altissia platform is helpful in improving their English language learning experience?
- What are the barriers that face vocational trainees when using the Altissia platform?
- What are the impacts of those barriers on the trainees' English language learning experience?

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Blended Learning as an Educational Approach in the Context of EFL Education

Within its broad definition, blended learning stands for the combination of traditional face-to-face education with more modern technological approaches of education (Isiguzel, 2014; Dziuban et al., 2018; Rahim, 2019; Yu et al., 2022). Such a combination results in a 'seamless linking' of both formal instruction and informal learning (Cao, 2023) as well as provide them with 'collaborative tasks' (Rahim, 2019) which supports and promotes student-centeredness. These collaborative tasks call for in-person and virtual activities which allows students to engage in an extensive range of options for collaboration, exploration, and discussion in the classroom (Isiguzel, 2014). This type of flexibility that this approach provides for learners and for education in general explains the ever-growing interest in this approach and its widespread adoption throughout various educational settings. This also explains the number of publications which began increasing in 2017, peaked in the year 2020, and continues till today (Platonova, 2022; Cruz-Cárdenas et al., 2023; Ishmuradova et al., 2024). However, for this type of approach to reach its great potential, it must be managed effectively in a way that the two models are used complementarily (Kholifa et al., 2020) especially since the use of blended learning directly

affects students' motivation which in turn has an impact on their performance and overall achievement (Rahim, 2019).

As to EFL education, blended learning has been also widely adopted to enhance students' English language learning. Opting for this approach provides advantages for learners (Simbolon, 2021). One of those advantages is having a 'dynamic language input' that allows learners to learn and practice the language at their own pace inside and beyond the classroom walls (Rahim, 2019) while engaging in different learning activities and using many online learning tools (Simbolon, 2021). Another advantage is that it encourages learners to become autonomous learners and proficient language learners in the long run (Rahim, 2019).

2.2. Blended Learning for Vocationally Oriented EFL Education in Morocco

According to Yalçinkaya (2015), in the context of vocational training, the use of blended learning for language learning must be introduced in a 'model' that is methodologically appropriate and meets the required pedagogical objectives. Moreover, since the vocational education revolves not only around developing the students' knowledge and skills but also on developing their "craftsmanship and innovation and entrepreneurship" (Jiang, 2019) in today's digitalized age in which language proficiency is a persisting requirement, it has become mandatory for vocational institutions to introduce newly advanced language platforms and restructure their teaching and learning spaces to accommodate for this kind of educational environment.

In light of these current technological transitions, traditional vocational education models in Morocco have also been reevaluated to adopt and adapt blended learning (Alami & El Idrissi, 2022). For Moroccan vocational training institutions or commonly known as OFPPT institutions (Office of Vocational Training and Employment Promotion), which were founded in 1974 to provide free of charge vocational training to meet the requirements and qualifications needs of the job market (Bibliotheca Alexandrina, n.d.), they have recently taken initiative in integrating blended learning through adopting a e-learning management system known as Altissia. This platform, which was designed according to the guidelines of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFRL), has been made available free of charge to all trainees to facilitate and promote distance language learning of three main languages, French, English and Spanish (OFPPT, 2020). This integration, therefore, has marked a significant paradigm shift in its educational and training policies for a better integration of the trainees in today's revolutionary job market.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

The study adopted a mixed-method research approach making use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. A major reason behind opting for this type of approach is that it helps to investigate an issue better than a single approach (Hennick et al., 2020), which in turn helps in enhancing the findings' validity and credibility. On that account, to answer the guiding research questions of this study, quantitative data was obtained through the questionnaire whereas qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews.

3.2. Population and Sample

Following convenience sampling, namely due to the availability of the participants at the time of the study and their willingness to participate in the research, a total of 113 trainees (N=113) completed the questionnaire. The participants were first year trainees belonging to the same public vocational training institution of the 'Office de la Formation Professionnelle et de la Promotion du Travail' (OFPPT), and representing three different specialties: Restaurant Agent, Digital Infrastructure, and Tailoring and Couture. There were 57 females (50.4%) and 56 males (49.6%). For the age distribution, more than half of the participants (67.3%) were between 16 and 20 years old, 28.3% were between 21 and 25 years old, and the rest aged under 16 and over 25. As to the participants level of education before accessing the training institution, a great majority had their baccalaureate degree (71.7%), 22.1% had 9th grade degree, and only 3 trainees were university students dropouts. Table 1 below summarizes the demographic information of the respondents. For qualitative data collection, 9 trainees were invited to take part in semi structured interviews. 5 of them were females and 4 were males. They ranged in age from 17 to 25.

3.3. Research Instrument

The questionnaire was designed in English and administered in Arabic. It was shared among the trainees in two forms: an online survey which was administered through Google Forms, and a paper survey which was distributed in-person. The full questionnaire was developed based on a variety of studies (e.g., Rahim, 2019; Kholifah et al., 2020; Simbolon, 2021). Prior to its administration, the questionnaire was pilot tested among a small representative sample of trainees (n=10). The pilot test feedback allowed for a preliminary assessment of the questionnaire's comprehensibility and reliability and an enhancement of its question wording

and overall structure. For this study, there were two main parts dedicated to answer the guiding questions raised earlier. Part I contained questions about the respondents' demographic information, such as gender, age, education levels, and specialty. As to part II, it included 4 questions: the first 2 items using a five-point Likert scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree to examine frequency of using Altissia and its effectiveness in improving the trainees' English language learning experience, and the 2 items, respectively explored the barriers that face vocational trainees when using the Altissia platform and the impacts of those barriers on the trainees' English language learning experience.

Table 1. Research participants' demographic information

Socio-demographic items		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Missing	0	0.0%
	Female	57	50.4%
	Male	56	49.6%
Age	Missing	2	1.8%
	Under 16	1	0.9%
	16-20	76	67.3%
	21-25	32	28.3%
	Over 25	2	1.8%
Level of Education	Missing	4	3.5%
	Baccalaureate degree	81	71.7%
	9 th grade	25	22.1%
	University student	3	2.7%
Training Program	Missing	2	1.8%
	Restaurant Agent	61	54.0%
	Digital Infrastructure	37	32.7%
	Tailoring and Couture	13	11.5%

As to the semi-structured interview, it included questions that aimed to gain more insight into the effectiveness of blended learning in learning English, the barriers that the trainees encountered when using this approach, and the impacts of those barriers on their overall

experience of using this approach. The interview was designed based on the questions raised in this study and was conducted in Arabic as the participants felt most comfortable speaking it.

3.4. Research Analysis

To analyze and interpret the research results, the collected data from the questionnaire was computed and run by SPSS software version 26.0 and Microsoft Excel. As for the semi-structured interviews, they were recorded, transcribed and then translated from Arabic to English using both machine translation and forward translation. They were later themed according to the guiding research questions to be used in the analysis and interpretation of this study.

4. Results

The results of this study are presented in four sections corresponding to the four research questions focusing on vocational trainees' frequency of use of the Altissia platform and its effectiveness in improving their English language learning, the barriers that face them when using this platform and the impacts of those barriers on their English language learning experience and overall utility of blended learning.

4.1. Vocational Trainees' Frequency of Using Altissia to Improve English Language Experience

When asked about how often respondents used the Altissia platform to support and improve their English language learning, almost half of them (49.6%) reported that they sometimes used it, while only a small portion of 5.3% that they always used it and 15% reported that they often used it. Notably, around 17% of the respondents reported that they never used it and about 14% said they rarely used it.

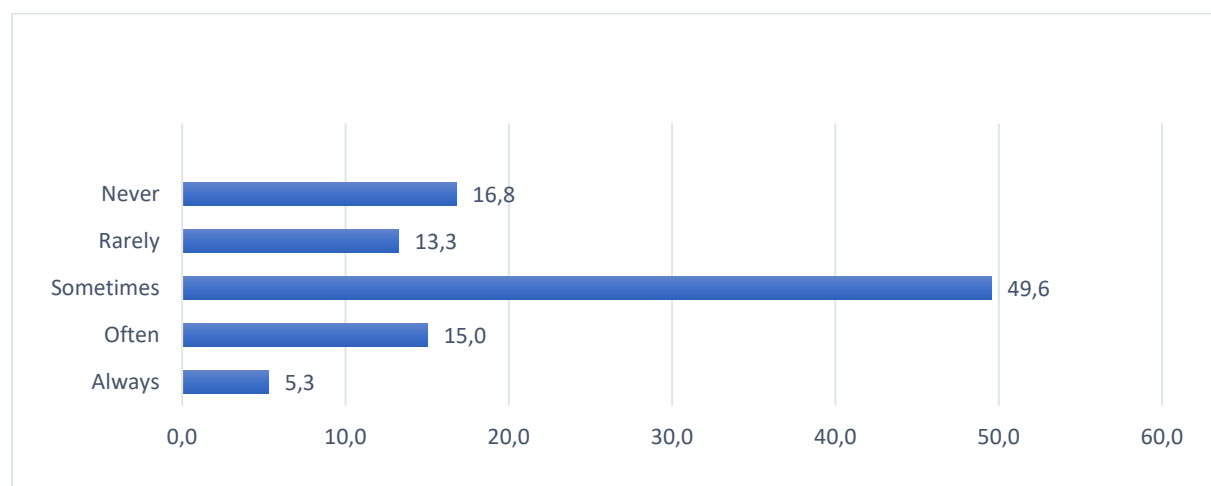


Figure 1. Vocational trainees' frequency of using Altissia to improve English language experience

Regarding the results of qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews, the majority (7 out of 9) of the interviewed participants reported that they rarely used it. For instance, Interviewee 2 reported that he used it once to twice a week for half an hour. Similarly, Interviewee 1 revealed that he used to use it once to twice a week until he lost his login information; he stated, *“I used to use it once to twice a week until I had difficulty accessing the platform when I forgot my password.”* Likewise, Interviewees 3 and 4 used to use the platform and then they stopped due to different reasons; Interviewee 3 stated, *“I used it for almost a month when we were given the login and password just to please the teacher because he called track our hours of use on the platform and then I stopped,”* while Interviewee 4 said, *“I used to use it before, especially to learn French, because we had some distance learning hours when the teacher mandated it.”* It is worth noting that when the platform was first introduced, the participants reported that the instructors of English and French mandated their trainees use of the platform till issues of accessibility arose.

4.2. Altissia's Role in Improving the Respondents' English Language Learning Experience

As can be seen in Figure 2, it can be noticed that more than half of the respondents agreed (53.1%) followed by around 18% of them who strongly agreed that the platform helps improve English language learning experience. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that about 22% selected the option neutral, whereas only a very small portion disagreed (4.4%) and less than 1% strongly disagreed that it does.

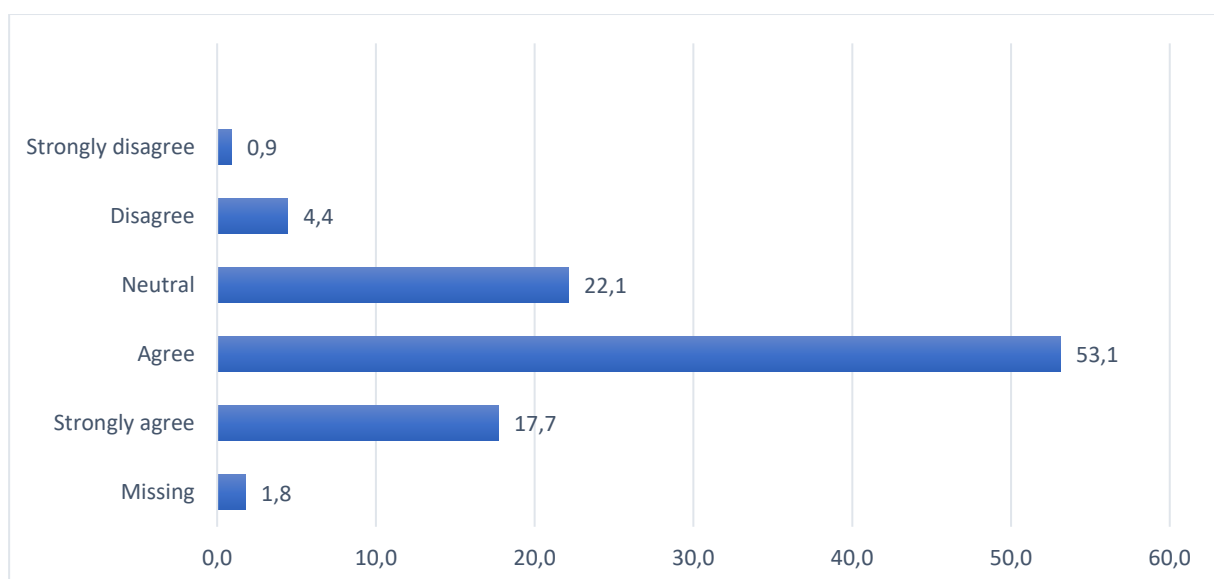


Figure 2. Extent to which respondents believe that Altissia helps improve English language learning experience

As to data collected from the semi-structured interviews, in answering the question “What do you think about Altissia? Do you believe it helps you improve your English?”, five of the interviewed respondents described it using positive vocabulary such as “good” and “great”. Two of them used the word “beneficial” and “helpful”, saying “*The platform is beneficial for anyone who wants to learn the language*” (Interviewee 6) and “*It is a platform that helps learn the language and its rules*” (Interviewee 8). However, two interviewees (7 and 9) used the word “Okay.”

4.3. The Barriers that Face Vocational Trainees when Using the Altissia Platform

By examining figure 3, the main barrier that faced vocational trainees when using the Altissia platform was their difficulty accessing the internet (68.8%). This barrier was followed by personal time constraints to use the platform (30.4%) and relying on the traditional way of learning English (23.3%). Other barriers were that they found the platform boring and impractical (17%), they preferred other platforms (16.1%), and finally 15.2% of them found that the platform’s level higher than their level of English.

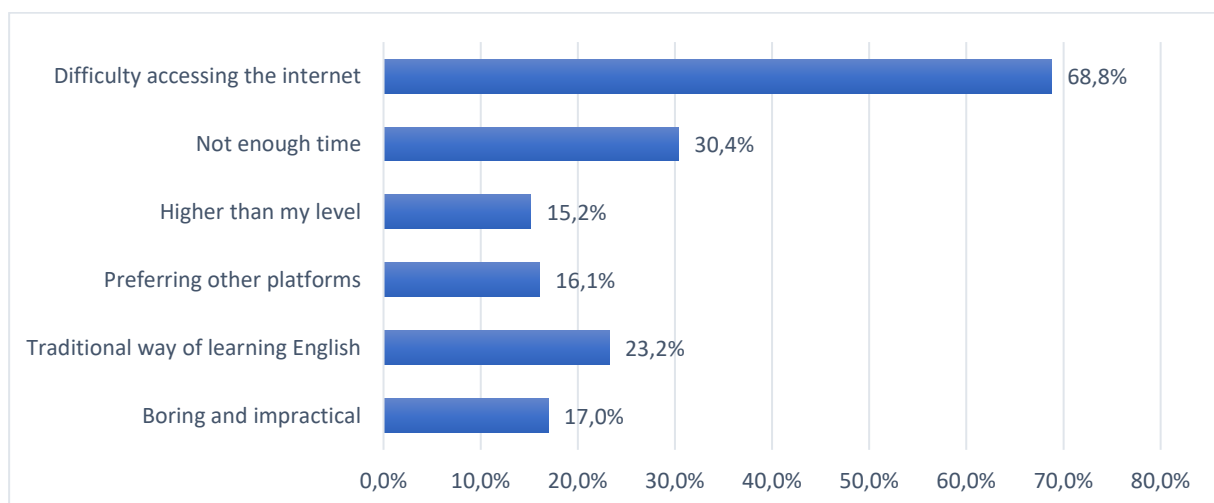


Figure 3. The barriers that face vocational trainees when using the Altissia platform

Concerning the barriers that impeded the respondents use of Altissia, while interviewees 5 and 6 answered that they did not face any barriers, other interviewees listed several barriers that were either personal or related to the platform. The barriers are summarized in the Figure below. For “getting bored easily”, it was evident from the testimonies made by the interviewees that it stemmed from the platform-related barriers, namely the outdated platform features and the challenging content and language. They also reported that they had “personal time constraints”, and they had difficulty balancing between their studies, daily life and finding time to use the

platform. As to the barrier of “access to the internet”, the interviewees generally attributed it to socioeconomic causes, especially that the majority of the participants came from low-income families.

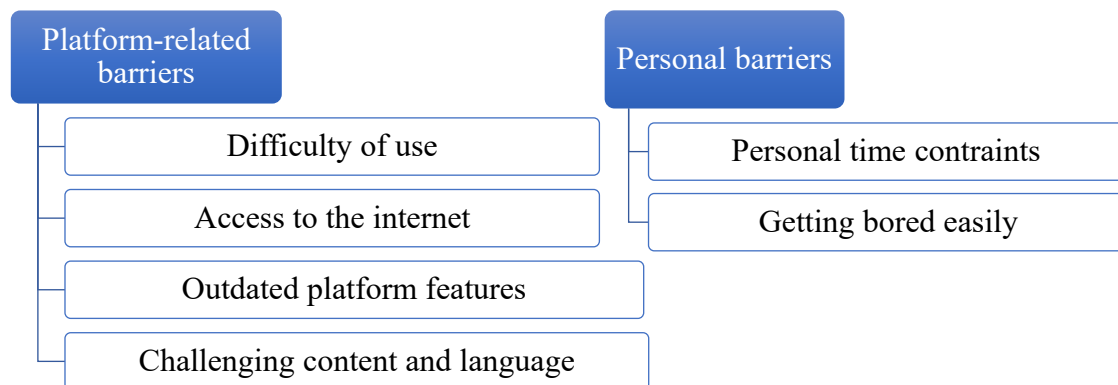


Figure 4. Barriers to using the Altissia Platform

4.4. The Impacts of the Barriers on the trainees' English Language Learning Experience

For the impacts the previously investigated barriers on the respondents' English language learning experience, Figure 5 clearly shows that the most shared impact among respondents' (74%) is that their English language level changed only slightly, while around 17% believed it did not change at all. Other impacts were that 26% felt frustrated with their classmates' progress in comparison to their, 11.5% of them felt bored when using the platform, and about 7% felt demotivated.

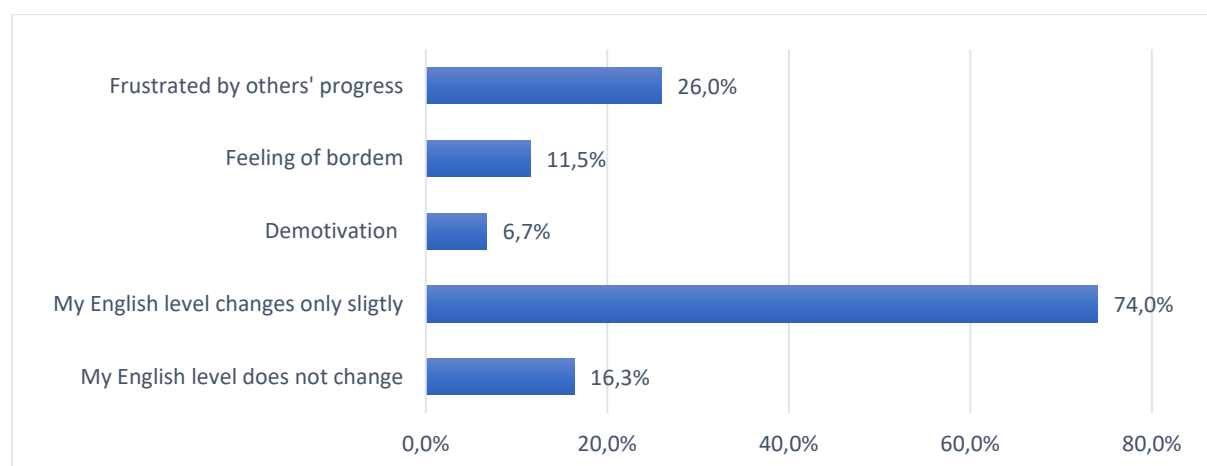


Figure 5. The impacts of the barriers on the trainees' English language learning experience

For the impacts of those barriers, most of the interviewees answered that the two main impacts were boredom and demotivation which affected their use of the platform and their overall language development. For instance, Interviewee 8 stated, “I mostly feel bored and prefer using

other platforms that are more up to date and user-friendly". Similarly, Interviewee 4 reported, *"I find it boring and impersonal and does not help me improve my level of English"*. As to Interviewee 7, he argued that there were better alternatives to the Altissia platform. He stated *"There are other platforms and Mobile Apps that are more easily accessible and which help you improve your English better than Altissia"*. In what follows is a discussion of the above results.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate vocational trainees' English language learning experience in a blended learning environment through their use of a free of charge online platform provided to them by their vocational training institution. First, the respondents were asked about the frequency of use of this platform and though half of them selected the option "sometimes", testimonies from the semi-structured interviews have revealed that their use was infrequent and only temporary because the teacher instructed them to use it. However, surprisingly enough, when asked about the perceived usefulness of this platform in improving their language learning experience, data from the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews has indicated the trainees' agreement on the usefulness of this platform. This largely aligns with findings from a study done by Losi (2022) who found a general agreement with the positive perceptions on Altissia's impact on their learning experience. However, there were 22% of them who reported that they had a neutral stance towards the usefulness of the platform might be an indicator of their personal disengagement despite its potential gains to the different needs of the trainees in their specialty.

In regard to the third guiding question in this study which aimed to identify the barriers that faced the respondents when using the platform, they were divided into platform-related barriers and personal barriers. For the main barriers related to the platform, they were as follows difficulty accessing the internet, difficulty of use, and challenging content and language taught in the platform. For difficulty of accessing the internet, though the OFPPT offers the trainees with SIM cards specifically for the use of this platform, the trainees reported that in most cases those SIM cards do not work well. As to personal barriers, there were mainly two of them, personal time constraints and feeling of boredom when using the platform. These barriers had three main impacts on the trainees' perception and use of the platform which were boredom and demotivation which in turn influenced their level of the language and their development of it. Such limitations, namely, technical barriers and personal barriers, along with their impacts

were consistent with Buddah's et al. (2024) findings who have done a comprehensive review that covered a total of 25 primary studies which also investigated barriers to the implementation of technology to support blended learning environments worldwide. Similarly, in a study done by Cao (2023), similar barriers in addition to others such as "poorly designed menus and interfaces" and "software compatibility problems" were also found to affect learners' motivation and enthusiasm for blended learning.

6. Limitations and Recommendations

The scope sample is considered one limitation of this study. In light of this, evidence would be more cogent with a larger number of participants and larger groups of participants such as vocational language instructors besides vocational trainees. However, this study paves the way for future research and offers insightful perspectives for educational designers to design and introduce more learning-friendly blended Approaches and tools especially since blended learning can positively influence learners' performance and achievement (Cao, 2023). Additionally, the current study investigates barriers and impacts to the utility of blended learning in the context of Moroccan public vocational training through the use of the Altissia platform, while there should be studies that investigate suitable recommendations to support the adoption of this educational approach and increase its utility in this particular context. Furthermore, OFPPT could partner with telecom providers to subsidize trainee with better and more reliable internet access.

7. Conclusion

The present study has examined the utility of blended learning approach for learning English language through investigating the utility of a platform called Altissia dedicated to integrating this approach in the context of vocational training. This utility is investigated in terms of the frequency of use, usefulness, barriers that impede the use of this platforms and their impacts. The findings revealed that though most respondents had a positive outlook on the usefulness of this platform in improving their English language learning experience, their use of it was infrequent and temporary. The findings also revealed that the main barriers that impede their use of the platform were either platform-related barriers such difficulty of access and difficulty of use, and personal barriers, namely, not having enough time and feeling of boredom. The impacts of these barriers were boredom and demotivation which affected their level of the language. Overall, this study contributes to the broader discussion on the integration of online

educational approaches into face-to-face educational approaches. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that this study is significant in that it is the first of its kind in the context of Moroccan vocational training.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributors

Samira El-Asri is a dedicated English language instructor and PhD holder with extensive experience in teaching both General English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Her main areas of research interests include English Language Teaching and Learning, Critical Thinking, and Cross-Cultural Learning.

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