

Language-majored students' perception of Blended learning at a university in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: Blended learning, Perception, Language-majored students, A University in Vietnam

Blended Learning (BL) has gained its prevalence in EFL teaching and learning context in Vietnamese higher education. This study aims to investigate language-majored students' perceptions of implementing Blended Learning in English classrooms at a Vietnamese public university. One hundred fifty-three freshmen majoring in Chinese, Korean and Japanese languages and currently learning English as a compulsory subject participated in this multi-method study. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with six randomly selected students, then transcribed and analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that participants mostly perceive that BL enhances digital literacy and motivation and supports in-class learning. However, some challenges faced by these respondents included technical difficulties and the lack of self-regulation skills. The findings are of great value in giving educators and students a profound understanding of BL in EFL classrooms. Based on the findings and discussion, the study gave some recommendations for EFL teachers and institutions to facilitate students' BL experience greatly.

Introduction

In the recent decade, the use of technology has brought tremendous development in the education standard in the higher education system. Technology is being increasingly applied in teaching and learning in higher education institutions so that they can transform themselves into fully electronic universities in the future through the Blended learning (BL) method. It is believed that the implementation of BL in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has facilitated students' learning effectively. Combining online and face-to-face can improve students' language input and promote learners' autonomy. Therefore, according to Reinders (2012), BL has been widely applied in English language education.

In teaching and learning language, the support of teachers or software is not the only factor to ensure the success of BL. Another important thing is the acceptance and approval among learners. In the study of Porter et al. (2014), he illustrates that one of the vital phases in

implementing BL is the attraction of potential students. In Vietnam, a small number of studies on BL (Vu et al., 2011; Nguyen et al., 2014) have been carried out. Moreover, there have not been many studies investigating the language-majored university students' perceptions of the implementation of BL. That is to say, further research on how students perceive BL in the Vietnamese setting is required.

Literature review

In Latin perception, the process in which information is organized, identified, and interpreted to represent the environment to be meaningful to people reflects the perception. Furthermore, according to Darmuh (2016), perception is defined as the process by which individuals interpret messages to give significance to their environment. A prime example of perception is when students give their evaluations to the lecturers. Based on students' perceptions, the lecturer can determine what is needed for their learning. Perception research can help lecturers become more effective teachers.

The notion of BL contains two words: blend means mixing and learning means studying. Chew (2009) states that this term is still debated among scholars, though it is widely used in an educational context. However, in recent years, the term BL has come to indicate a "course which combines a face-to-face (F2F) classroom component with an appropriate use of technology" (Dennis, 2013). According to Santosh (2013), BL is a type of formal education program where students receive at least some of their instructions and information online, with some degree of student autonomy over the timing, location, and/or pace of their learning.

Debra and John (2010) reveal that BL is an effective method for students and teachers because it provides them with different ways of approaching new teaching and learning that is not available in the traditional learning environment. Students can benefit from the best features of 2 learning modes: online and conventional face-to-face learning (Namysova et al., 2019).

Research shows a variety of advantages of BL in EFL contexts. First, by incorporating an online learning mode, BL can provide students with diverse sources of learning materials (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012). Therefore, students can have many more learning opportunities than they would not otherwise have when accessing current online resources.

Second, BL allows students to interact with teachers and other students in class more frequently (Reinders, 2012). More time in class could be spent on facilitating student-student and teacher-student interactions because students can self-study online. Third, BL can help learners engage in active and reflective learning. Freely accessing available online content in BL helps students have more time for reflection and improve their understanding of learning materials because they can learn or read the materials again whenever they want. Moskal and Cavanagh (2013) pointed out that students prefer BL because it enables them to work at their own pace and at any place. Incorporating online learning units allows learners to choose what, when, and how to study, which is suitable to their learning conditions or styles and highly motivates them as well.

Success in BL requires students' responsibility and active participation in their learning process (Launer, 2010) in order to achieve their learning objectives. Students may face two main challenges when it comes to implementing BL. Firstly, learners lack self-regulation skills. They need to understand their individual learning needs so that they can select necessary learning

procedures, evaluate and reflect on their learning progress, to adapt it as needed, but few students can follow the self-regulated learning practices which are required in BL.

Secondly, According to Teik (2016), Information and Communications Technology (ICT) facilities are one of the aspects that affect students' learning experience in a blended learning environment. However, students struggle with the use of technology in BL. Research reveals that technical problems can act as an obstacle to students' online learning, such as issues with an internet connection, the requirement for additional applications, or assignment submission systems (Moskal and Cavanagh, 2013). While taking BL courses, some learners also report their struggle with technological skills and technical assistance (Irum et al., 2020).

In the Vietnamese context, where EFL students are used to the teacher-controlled learning environment, learner-related challenges can be even more severe. Students often rely on their teachers' instructions and guidance to learn, which may prevent them from deciding what and how to learn. Besides, although students' interaction and collaboration with teachers and peers are essential in BL, it's the characteristics of Asian cultures, such as face-saving concerns, power distance between teachers and students, etc., that cause the challenge (Hofstede, 2010). However, with such a culture-driven context, limited research on BL has been carried out (Vu et al., 2011; Nguyen et al., 2014); therefore, more in-depth studies on students' perceptions of BL in the Vietnamese context should be conducted.

Research Questions

The study seeks the answer to the following questions in order to fill the research gap described above:

1. What are the language-majored students' perceptions of the BL method in English Language Teaching (ELT) at the School of Languages and Tourism (SLT)?
2. What are the language-majored students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of implementing the BL method in ELT at SLT?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The current study was conducted at the School of Languages and Tourism (SLT), Hanoi University of Industry (HaUI). A group of 153 first-year Chinese, Japanese, and Korean-majored students participated in the survey. In each class, there are about 23 students and they have followed an English 1 of 75 periods equivalent to A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Moreover, all English courses at SLT have applied the BL model with 40 in-class lessons and 35 online lessons. Therefore, students can learn face-to-face with teachers and peers and access the internal e-university system for free at <http://eop.edu.vn> to actively acquire knowledge for each lesson. During the first year, learners must complete two English courses, English 1 and English 2. The researchers chose first-year students as participants in this study because most had little or no chance to follow the BL method in learning languages beforehand, especially in using the EOP system in BL. Therefore, we want to know their perceptions of these issues in order to assist or guide them if necessary.

Design of the Study

Aiming to answer the research questions, the researchers have chosen mixed methods of data collection for accuracy, namely questionnaire, and interview.

Questionnaire

This instrument was used as the main approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the research question. Cohen et al. (2018) state that a questionnaire is "a useful instrument for gathering factual information, data on attitudes and preferences, beliefs and predictions, opinions, behaviors, and experiences-both in past and present time". In particular, the questionnaire adapted from Talis et al. (2018) consists of 5 questions that investigate language-majored students' perception of BL. A three-point Likert scale was used for gauging opinions: 1 = agree, 2 = neutral, 3 = disagree.

Interview

An interview is a useful tool for gathering information due to its provision of extensive information. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2012) define a qualitative interview as "unstructured, exploratory, open-ended, and typically in-depth so that several topics can be explored effectively." In other words, the interviewees are at ease responding to the questions in the absence of judgment by the interviewers. Data for this article consisted of 15-minute semi-structured interviews which were adapted from Talis et al. (2018) with seven randomly selected students from seven classes. This process investigates how students perceive the BL method and the advantages and challenges of implementing BL.

Data collection

Survey questionnaire

The researchers conducted the survey on Google Forms. In addition, the data collection procedure was divided into four phases: questionnaire design, pilot, questionnaire delivery, and data encoding. In the first step, the researchers designed the questionnaires and set up plans for collecting data. After that, the questionnaire was given to about 5-7 relevant respondents to get feedback and the workability of the questionnaire. Correction and adjustments have been made afterward. Then, the questionnaire was uploaded on Google Forms and sent to all respondents. Finally, encoding the data was of great importance. All the documents were synthesized and analyzed to determine the relevant content to the topic.

Interview

Interview investigation consists of some main stages, including thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting. First and foremost, the researchers formulated the purpose of the study and described the topic prior to the interviews. Then, the researchers planned the study design with regard to obtaining the intended knowledge. After that, it was time to conduct the interviews based on an interview guide. The next step was transcribing the data from oral speech to written text. Next, the researchers needed to analyze the interview material and verify the findings' generalizability, reliability, and validity. Finally, all the data needed to transfer into a readable product.

Data analysis procedure

First and foremost, the researchers spent lots of time studying and analyzing all the data from the questionnaires and interviews. Evidence from the records was noted down carefully and put in different groups.

In the meantime, findings from the survey questionnaires and the interviews were compared (and contrasted) to investigate students' perceptions of BL and the benefits and limitations of this method.

Findings and discussion

Students' perception

Regarding the students' understanding of BL, the interviewed students agreed that BL refers to the combination of online and face-to-face learning and teaching. When being taught in BL mode, students are given instructions and information online then they are able to learn at their own paces. The evidence can be seen in students' answers to the following question.

Student A said:

In my opinion, BL means the mixture of both online and face-to-face learning. I can learn vocabulary, grammar, listening, and reading in advance, and then when I come to the class, the teacher will lecture more. (...) This helps me understand the lesson better.

Besides, the study also reveals that most participants expressed a positive perception of implementing BL in teaching and learning English. The result suggested that more than 80% of the students agree that BL makes their study more convenient as it enables them to learn as well as complete assignments anywhere, at any time.

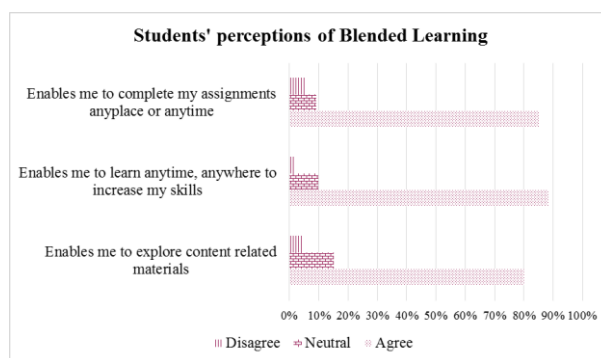


Figure 1 Students' perception of Blended learning

This aligns with studies conducted by (Tran Duc & Williamson, 2009). The students' positive perception of such a teaching method is based on the advantages of BL over the traditional teaching method in enhancing their linguistic competencies. Students also stated that tasks in BL were well-illustrated and presented in an easy way to follow, thereby enhancing their learning. It is important that the course's intended learning objectives correspond with the online activities to ensure a connection between the two components.

Benefits of Blended Learning in English Language Teaching for the students

With regard to the benefits of BL for language-majored students at SLT, data collected revealed that BL is helpful to students, especially in boosting their motivation and digital skills and fostering their participation in face-to-face lessons.

Motivation

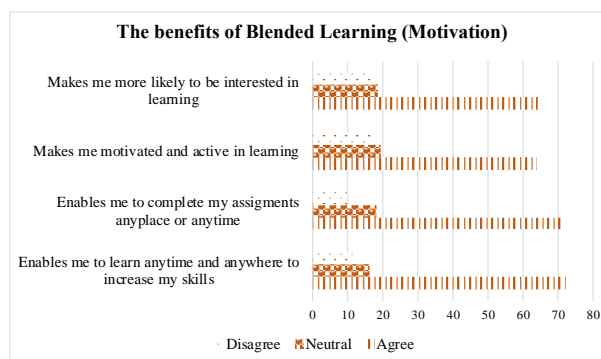


Figure 2 The benefits of Blended Learning (Motivation)

The chart demonstrates the benefits of BL in terms of enhancing students' motivation. More than 70% of language-majored students agreed that with the implementation of BL, they could learn and complete assignments regardless of time and location. Around 64% of respondents believed that BL increased their motivation, interest, and activeness in learning. This finding can also be seen in the interview when students expressed their satisfaction with enhanced motivation. For example, "I felt the vocabulary items on EOP were presented in detail and categorized by sub-topics, so I was motivated to learn and revise", said student A. This can be explained by the fact that materials and exercises on EOP are accessed irrespective of time and location. In addition, the materials also come in different formats, such as video or audio, and there are different types of exercises, thereby catering to students' diverse learning preferences and boosting their motivation.

Digital literacy

When being further interviewed, participating students shared that the implementation of BL allowed them to learn basic computer skills and use several applications. It can be seen from the chart that nearly 63% of students agreed that their technical skills were enhanced due to BL. As for student B, "I found myself better at technological skills than I was at high school because I knew how to use all the features on EOP to learn, do homework as well as give feedback for the course. Homework submission is often in the forms of YouTube or Google drive links, so BL also involves learning to use such applications.", she said.

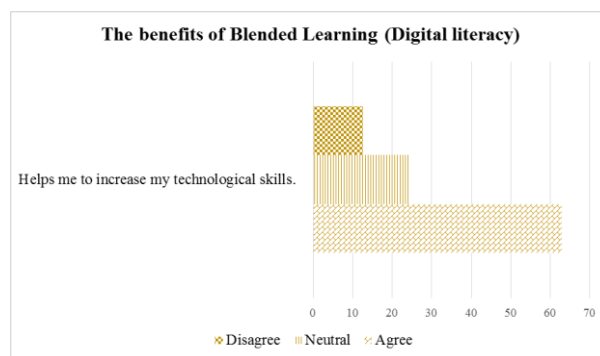


Figure 3 The benefits of Blended Learning (Digital literacy)

This is logical because online learning mode requires students to learn necessary computer skills so that they can use their online account to access materials, track their progress, take tests, and provide feedback to teachers and the online system.

In-class learning

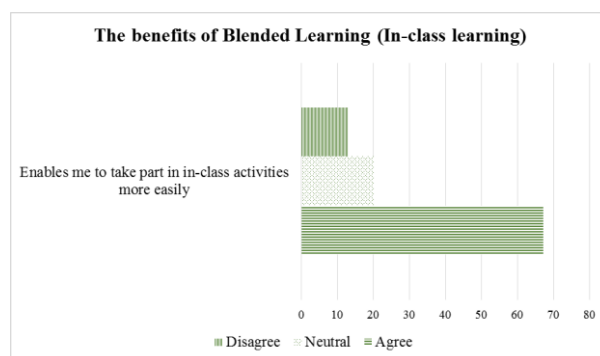


Figure 4 The benefits of Blended Learning (In-class learning)

This chart shows that for 67.1% of respondents, BL made their engagement in in-class activities easier. In further interviews, students emphasized the benefits of learning language knowledge and practicing receptive skills online prior to face-to-face lessons. Student F enjoyed this combination of online and offline modes because it was easier to apply vocabulary, grammar, and input from reading as well as listening tasks into speaking activities in class. To him, BL was more effective and time-saving than the traditional way of teaching. This is because face-to-face lessons consist of interactive speaking activities, and the input can be provided through materials and exercises on EOP.

Such advantages of BL are confirmed in previous studies by other researchers. According to Mu'ayyadah and Sahiruddin (2020), BL appeals to students because of the flexibility and freedom to learn at any place and anytime. The study conducted by Irum et al. (2020) also revealed that students become more self-dependent thanks to the completion of academic tasks through blended mode. Findings are also aligned with Talis et al. (2018) regarding students' interest and activeness.

Challenges of Blended Learning

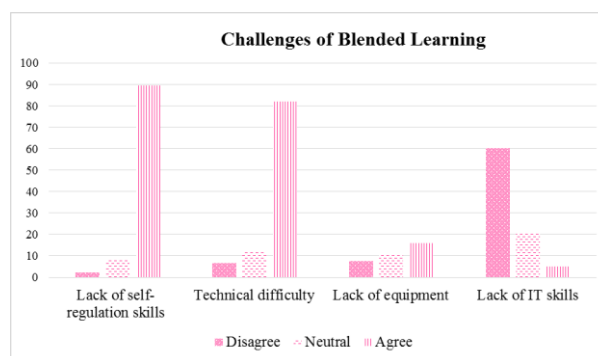


Figure 5 Challenges of Blended Learning

From the findings, it is clearly shown that the challenges faced by students while learning with BL are the 'lack of self-regulation skills' for 89.4% of student informants, followed by 82% of the respondents who chose technical difficulty. When being further interviewed, students A and C reported that they find it hard to proactively online self-study tasks as they are still accustomed to deadlines set by their teachers. The findings align with Yen and Huyen's study (2019). Although BL requires students' responsibility and active participation in their learning process (Alebaikan, 2010), students have long been asked to follow teachers' instructions (Tran Duc & Williamson, 2009). Such reliance on teachers for learning motivation and direction may hinder students from deciding the content and learning method as well as reaping benefits from BL.

Moreover, the problems with EOP system feedback also cause students frustration. In fact, the EOP system does not offer a 'sending private message' feature, and thereby students could not interact with their teachers directly through the EOP system. If they want to ask for teachers' instant feedback, they have to use another software such as Zalo, Facebook, or Gmail. Equipment and technical skills seem not to be a problem, with only 15.7% and 18.7 % of students, respectively, finding it difficult to learn through BL with the 'lack of equipment' and 'lack of IT skills'. These findings are aligned with the study of Reinders (2012), who found that students experience a sense of being lost and struggling with technology while taking BL courses. Therefore, they may not have recognized the benefits and teachers' intentions behind the materials presented. To counter such challenges of BL, orientation sections and help desks should be provided before and during the course. Besides, the EOP system should also be maintained and improved on a regular basis to make sure technical problems should be minimized. Moreover, there is a need to incorporate features that allow teachers to give instant feedback to students.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the findings and discussion that students positively perceive the implementation of BL at a university in Vietnam. Most students felt they were motivated by BL as materials are available and presented in various forms. The use of BL also provides opportunities for students to practice topical vocabulary and grammar structures in advance,

which fosters in-class engagement.

The findings suggest that similar challenges of BL as those in other studies were perceived by students at a university in Vietnam. However, the percentages of agreements to items belonging to challenges were relatively higher, over 80%, while the figures for these problems in other research ranged from 50 to 60%.

These findings lay a foundation for several implications so that lecturers can boost students' experience. It is suggested that communicational tools should be incorporated into EOP, thereby providing a platform for students to interact with their teachers and receive instant support. In addition, addressing technical problems can also make BL experiences more rewarding.

With regard to limitations and recommendations, this study mainly relied on self-reported data to investigate students' perceptions of BL. Therefore, further research can be conducted using classroom observations and teacher-student online discussions. Besides, as suggested in the findings, teachers' guidance and facilitation also affected students' learning experiences. Because of this, more studies can examine the benefits of BL for the groups of students who receive more guidance and support than this current one. Finally, there is also the need for research into the implementation of BL in other Vietnamese EFL contexts, such as secondary or high school to analyze how students with different competencies, levels of autonomy, and technical skills perceived BL.

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