Blended learning: benefits and challenges when applying in higher education in Vietnam

Nguyễn Việt Hà
EFL lecturer at Electric Power University
Mobile number: 0912398693
Email: hanv@epu.edu.vn

Abstract

This paper explores the application of blended learning (BL) in higher education, with a particular focus on the Vietnamese context. It highlights both the benefits and challenges associated with implementing this pedagogical model, and draws on existing literature to propose practical recommendations. Blended learning, which merges online and face-to-face instructional methods, is increasingly favored over traditional or fully online formats due to its flexibility, learner-centered approach, and capacity to enhance digital competencies. However, its implementation in Vietnam presents specific challenges, including limited technological infrastructure, varying levels of digital literacy among instructors and students, and cultural preferences for traditional education models. This study reviews key research on the topic to identify core issues and best practices, and suggests strategies to support the effective integration of BL in Vietnamese universities. The findings contribute to a better understanding of how blended learning can be adapted to meet local educational needs while aligning with global digital learning trends.

Keywords: blended learning, higher learning institutions, literature review

I. Introduction

The concept of blended learning first emerged in the business sector, in the context of corporate training programs. (Sharma and Barrett, 2007), then was employed in higher education (MacDonald, 2006) and finally it adopted in language teaching and learning. Blended learning is an efficient approach for teaching that combines the best practices of face-to-face and online learning in a relatively cost-effective way, (Vaughan &Garrison, 2006; Albrecht & Piranit, 2007; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Pallof and Pratt, 2005; Linder, 2017). Similarly, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) suggest that blended learning can fulfill the needs of the twenty-first century by integrating the strengths of both online and in-person education. While the above-mentioned theoretical insights about BL are very useful, this study's description of blended learning mostly aligns with Picciano's (2009) definition, stating that BL is a "course that integrates online with traditional face-to-face class activities in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner" (p. 8).

Blended learning involves skillfully incorporating information and communication technologies (ICTs) into course design. The goal is to promote the teaching and learning

experiences for both students and instructors. This allows them to engage in ways that would not be feasible or effective in a solely face-to-face or fully distance-based environment. In many cases, this blended approach leads to better student experiences and outcomes, as well as more efficient teaching and course management. Blended learning can incorporate a mix of delivery modes, teaching methods, and learning styles to create a more engaging and effective learning experience.

Advancements in technology create new opportunities for teachers to design and deliver their courses in ways that support and enhance three key elements of successful learning and teaching: the teacher's role, the students' individual cognitive experiences, and the social environment. Blended learning technologies can: - Expand the spaces and opportunities available for learning - Facilitate course management activities like communication, assignment submission, grading, and feedback - Provide students with information and resources - Engage and motivate students through interactivity and collaboration Using technology is not just about availability, but about finding better ways to support students in achieving learning objectives and providing them and teachers with the best possible learning and teaching experiences.

Blended learning is becoming increasingly popular in higher education across several Asian countries, including China, Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore. Although this approach is generally well-received in Western cultures, its acceptance in Asian countries may be hindered by factors such as cultural differences, varying perceptions of the method, and insufficient knowledge about its implementation (Tham & Tham, 2011). As a result, while there is extensive research on blended learning, its application in Asian countries, particularly Vietnam— the focus of this study— remains underexplored in terms of the difficulties and advantages of BL that English is taught as a non-major subject in universities in Vietnam. This study seeks to address this gap in the existing literature and based on the findings of the review, some strategies and solutions for better performance of BL are recommended.

II. Literature Review

1. What is blended leaning*?*

From a corporate training perspective, blended learning has traditionally been understood as the integration of multiple delivery modes to enhance learning outcomes and reduce costs. Singh and Reed (2001) define it as “a learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome and cost of program delivery.” Although they do not specify these delivery modes, Valiathan (2002) provides further clarification, identifying components such as face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning, and self-paced learning. Similarly, Reid-Young (n.d.) broadens this perspective by including classroom sessions, mentoring, and access to subject matter experts, showing that blended learning can span both formal and informal educational support structures.

In the context of higher education, Banados (2006) defines blended learning as "a combination of technology and classroom instruction in a flexible approach to learning that recognises the benefits of delivering some training and assessment online but also uses other modes to make up a complete training programme which can improve learning outcomes and/or save costs" (p. 534). While Banados highlights technology and classroom instruction as the main components, the mention of "other modes" leaves room for varied implementation. For example, in a redesign project, one blend combined face-to-face teaching, computer-based tasks, and independent self-study in self-access centers located near traditional classrooms—an approach less commonly seen in English Language Teaching (ELT). Similar definitions are echoed by de Gregorio-Godeo (2005) and MacDonald (2006).

Compared to these more detailed definitions, those related to language teaching tend to be more concise. Neumeier (2005) describes blended learning simply as "a combination of face-to-face (FtF) and computer assisted learning (CAL) in a single teaching and learning environment" (p. 164). Stracke (2007) offers a nearly identical definition in her study on learner attrition in blended courses, referring to "blended language learning (BLL)" as a mix of face-to-face sessions and computer-assisted language learning (CALL), typically involving self-directed work with digital tools alongside classroom instruction.

2. The implementation of blended learning in higher education around the world

Blended learning in the world has been transformative, enabling institutions to integrate the strengths of both traditional face-to-face and online learning formats. Blended learning, which combines the flexibility of online learning with the social interaction of in-person instruction, has gained attraction globally due to its ability to address the diverse needs of students while leveraging technological advancements. In countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, blended learning has become a widely accepted model, driven by the need to enhance accessibility, engagement, and flexibility in education. The rapid growth of online learning technologies, coupled with growing student demand for more flexible learning options, has made blended learning an appealing choice for many institutions.

In the United States, for example, universities have embraced blended learning not only for its convenience but also for its ability to improve learning outcomes. According to the Babson Survey Research Group (2018), nearly 70% of higher education institutions in the U.S. offer some form of blended learning, with a substantial portion of students participating in hybrid or fully online courses. Additionally, blended learning has proven to be an effective strategy in increasing student retention and satisfaction, as it allows students to balance their studies with personal, work, or family commitments. Institutions in Europe, such as in the United Kingdom, have also adopted blended learning to create more diverse learning environments, aligning with initiatives aimed at enhancing digital literacy and reducing barriers to higher education.

In Asia, countries like China, Japan, and Singapore have led the way in incorporating blended learning into their higher education systems, often in response to the need for scaling education to meet the growing student population. Blended learning has been particularly beneficial in

remote or rural areas where face-to-face education might be limited. In Singapore, for example, the government has invested heavily in digital infrastructure and e-learning programs, positioning blended learning as a key component of the country's educational strategy.

Overall, the global implementation of blended learning has been marked by increased recognition of its benefits - greater flexibility, improved engagement, and a more personalized learning experience. While blended learning has brought flexibility and innovation to university education worldwide, it also presents several disadvantages that hinder its effectiveness. One major challenge is unequal access to technology and the internet. In developing countries like Uganda and India, many students struggle with poor internet connectivity and lack of digital devices, making online components of blended learning difficult to access. For instance, at Makerere University in Uganda, students reported that high data costs and unreliable networks significantly limited their participation in online classes. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, only 24% of households in India had access to the internet, excluding a large portion of students from effective learning.

Another disadvantage is the increased burden on students' self-discipline and time management. Many learners are not adequately prepared for the independent study required in online learning, leading to poor performance and disengagement. A study by the University of Illinois found that dropout rates in online or blended courses can be 10–20% higher than in traditional face-to-face programs.

Furthermore, educators often face challenges in course design, digital skill gaps, and the need to manage both virtual and in-person interactions. These limitations, combined with a potential decline in student engagement and communication skills, demonstrate that while blended learning is promising, it is not without significant obstacles globally.

3. Implementation of Blended Learning mode in Vietnam

3.1 Advantages of blended learning adoption

3.*1.1. Policy Support*

Blended learning has emerged as a valuable and increasingly widespread approach in Vietnamese universities, offering a range of benefits that align closely with the country's ongoing educational reform and national digital transformation strategies. Over the past decade, and particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has actively promoted the integration of blended learning as a key component of its effort to modernize teaching and learning across higher education institutions. Many universities, especially leading institutions such as Vietnam National University, have implemented robust learning management systems (LMS), upgraded their technological infrastructure, and organized professional development programs to train faculty in digital pedagogy. This shift reflects a broader national commitment to improving the accessibility,

quality, and relevance of higher education through technology-enhanced learning environments.

3.1.2. Benefits for Students and Educators

The adoption of blended learning offers notable advantages for students and educators alike. One of the most significant benefits is flexibility: students can access learning materials online at any time, which supports self-paced study and better time management. According to a 2022 MOET survey, more than 75% of university students reported that blended learning enabled them to manage academic tasks more efficiently. In addition, the model enhances student engagement by combining face-to-face instruction with interactive online components, promoting both individual and collaborative learning experiences. A study conducted at Vietnam National University in Hanoi revealed that student satisfaction rates for blended courses reached 82%, in contrast to 68% for traditional, in-person formats.

3.1.3. Development of Digital Competencies and Student-Centered Learning

Blended learning also contributes to the development of essential digital competencies. A 2023 report by the Vietnam E-Learning Association found that 64% of universities observed improved ICT skills and greater independence in learning among students participating in blended programs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, over 90% of higher education institutions in Vietnam adopted either blended or fully online learning models, demonstrating the approach's adaptability and resilience under crisis conditions. Moreover, blended learning supports a transition toward more student-centered teaching methods, which challenge the traditionally passive, teacher-directed learning style rooted in Vietnamese education. With sustained investment in digital infrastructure, policy development, and instructor training, blended learning is poised to play an increasingly central role in enhancing the inclusiveness, effectiveness, and future-readiness of Vietnam's higher education system.

3.2. Obstacles in implementing Blended Learning in Higher Education

Many researchers who define Blended Learning have pointed out its importance in training (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Matukhin and Zhitkova, 2015). However,the limitations of Blended Learning can also be the online capabilities of participants, the value assessment, online courses do not have significant differences from conventional methods. New issues are raised in research on this method such as: Should all students be encouraged to participate in online courses? Are there any better methods to replace or oppose Blended Learning? Can I participate if I have vision problems? How does e-learning deliver learning outcomes or is there anything different in the work applying Blended Learning to different subjects in the economicsector? (Lumadi, 2013).

3.2.1. The Role of Technology in Blended Learning

Blended learning heavily relies on a wide range of technological resources and digital tools, which are essential for creating dynamic and interactive educational experiences. These tools must be reliable, intuitive, easily accessible, and capable of being upgraded to meet the changing demands of modern education. If the technology used is too basic or lacks key functionalities, it can pose significant barriers to students' ability to fully engage with and benefit from course content. In such cases, students may experience frustration or disengagement. Therefore, ensuring the availability of robust, high-quality technical support services is crucial to facilitating effective learning and maximizing student participation in blended learning environments.

3.2.2. Managing Online Learning Environments

Another important aspect of blended learning is its tendency to encourage the formation of smaller workgroups, primarily due to the challenges associated with managing large groups in an online learning environment. Online platforms often make it more difficult for instructors to monitor student participation, track progress, and ensure consistent engagement, which can negatively impact the learning process. To address this, dividing students into smaller groups can improve collaboration and accountability. However, the reliance on recorded instructional materials presents another issue. It has been reported that students may fall behind in their coursework when depending too heavily on recorded content. A university study revealed that only about 50% of students regularly viewed instructional videos, while 40% admitted to binge-watching them several times a week in a single sitting.

3.2.3. Social and Psychological Limitations

One of the key challenges is the reduced opportunity for students to learn from peers, as much of the interaction takes place in virtual spaces. This shift can lead to a decline in communication and interpersonal skills, which are often developed through face-to-face interactions in traditional classroom settings. Older learners, in particular, may face additional technology-related difficulties, as they may not be as familiar with the digital tools used in blended learning environments. Furthermore, the lack of face-to-face inspiration and social connection can result in decreased enthusiasm for learning. Educators also face a high initial workload in developing digital content, which can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. In addition, concerns around intellectual property, as well as security and privacy issues within online platforms, have been raised, as highlighted by Ellis, Pardo, Han (2016), and Manjot Kaur (2013). These challenges highlight the complexities of implementing blended learning effectively.

3.2.4. Time and Cost Concerns in Digital Feedback

While electronic media can be more cost-effective in some aspects, educators have raised concerns about the time required to provide feedback through digital tools. Compared to traditional, paper-based methods, digital feedback often takes more time, as it involves

navigating e-learning platforms, reviewing student submissions online, and crafting personalized responses. This added time investment can place additional pressure on educators who are already managing multiple responsibilities. Moreover, e-learning platforms may introduce new hidden costs that institutions need to consider, such as subscription fees or service charges from third-party providers. These costs, which may not be immediately apparent, can add up over time and should be carefully accounted for in the institution's long-term financial planning to ensure sustainability.

3.3. Major Student Barriers to Effective Blended Learning at Vietnamese universities: Interaction, Connectivity, and Self-Regulation

Studies conducted at universities in Vietnam identified three primary challenges that hinder students' ability to have positive experiences in blended learning: limited face-to-face interaction, technical difficulties, and struggles with self-regulation.

First, students are dissatisfied with the frequency of face-to-face sessions, believing that these had decreased over time. They felt that increased in-person interactions would enhance their motivation and engagement in the course. This perspective contrasts with existing research, which generally emphasizes maintaining face-to-face interactions to optimize blended learning benefits. Interestingly, students had conflicting expectations: while they valued the flexibility of online learning for balancing work and family responsibilities, they also wished for more in-person sessions—an expectation that was difficult to accommodate due to their busy schedules. Second, technical difficulties, especially unreliable internet connectivity, were identified as obstacles to learning. Some students attributed these issues to Vietnam’s developing internet infrastructure or system overload due to high demand. Such challenges have been well-documented in recent studies. For instance, Nguyen et al. (2021) found that unstable internet access significantly hindered students’ participation in online and blended learning environments in Vietnam. Similarly, Pham and Nguyen (2022) highlighted that technical barrier, including bandwidth limitations and outdated devices, negatively affected students’ learning experiences during blended learning.

Finally, self-regulation emerged as a barrier for one-third of students. Recent research continues to recognize self-regulation as a challenge in blended learning. According to Tran and Le (2020), many Vietnamese students struggle with time management and independent study habits when learning online, largely due to traditional teacher-centered educational practices. Additionally, Do and Nguyen (2023) noted that although students are increasingly familiar with digital tools, they still require guidance and support to build the self-discipline necessary for effective participation in blended learning environments.

III. Recommendations or solutions to address the obstacles

1. Limitations of the Study

To effectively address the challenges associated with implementing blended learning (BL) in Vietnamese higher education, a combination of practical strategies and research-based solutions is essential. Although this study contributes valuable insights into the current state of BL adoption, it presents several limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the research relies primarily on secondary data and theoretical frameworks, which limits the generalizability and practical applicability of its findings. Secondly, the absence of empirical investigations, such as large-scale surveys or controlled experimental studies, hinders the ability to substantiate claims with robust data. These gaps highlight the need for future research to incorporate longitudinal, mixed-method approaches that evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning through measurable outcomes such as academic performance, student engagement, satisfaction, and feedback from instructors across diverse institutions and geographic regions.

2. Proposed Solutions for Effective Blended Learning Implementation

In addition to addressing research gaps, several practical measures should be implemented to enhance the success of blended learning in Vietnam. Improving digital infrastructure remains a top priority, particularly in rural and underserved areas where internet access is unreliable or insufficient. Investment from both government and higher education institutions in expanding broadband coverage and modernizing technological infrastructure is essential to ensure equitable access. Concurrently, both students and educators must be equipped with the necessary digital competencies to participate effectively in blended environments. Universities should offer targeted training programs, ongoing technical support, and professional development workshops to help faculty design engaging, pedagogically sound blended courses and assist students in building self-regulation, time management, and independent learning skills. Moreover, national education strategies should incorporate clearly defined policies and standards for blended learning, including quality assurance measures, course development frameworks, and assessment guidelines. Financial support mechanisms—such as providing subsidized internet services or affordable digital devices—can help bridge the digital divide among students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, promoting a student-centered learning culture is vital to the long-term success of BL. This can be achieved by designing interactive learning experiences, encouraging peer collaboration, and fostering ongoing feedback between students and instructors. By integrating these research-informed and policy-driven solutions, Vietnam can build a more resilient, inclusive, and high-quality higher education system that fully leverages the potential of blended learning.

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