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**UNIVERSITY OF LANGUAGES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

**FACULTY OF POST-GRADUATE STUDIES**

**NGUYỄN THỊ THU HIỀN**

**FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS’ BLENDED LEARNING**

**- A STUDY AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM**

**(Những yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc học theo mô hình học tập kết hợp**

**của sinh viên- Nghiên cứu tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam)**

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Phản biện 1:

Phản biên 2:

Phản biên 3:

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

* 1. Rationale

In the age of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) explosion, Blended learning (BL) is considered “the best of both worlds” (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004) because it “combines the properties and possibilities of both to go beyond the capacities of each separately” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p6). However, whether the application of BL model really brings the course effectiveness in higher education is still a controversial and an open-ended question. A close analysis of the existing body of research revealed that previous studies had shown contradicting results about the effectiveness of BL method in terms of students’ learning outcome as well as their satisfaction towards the integration of this delivery method in their learning. Therefore, “there is no single recipe for designing a successful blended course” (Pearcy, 2009, p.90) and “we should look into the many different factors that influence teaching and learning in different formats and in different contexts.” (Nortvig et al., 2018). This phenomenon really urged the researcher to conduct an investigation into the application of BL in the context of Vietnam, especially the factors which promoted or hindered its efficiency. Thanks to this research, the risk of failure during the implementation of future blended courses may be reduced.

Another reason encouraging the researcher to do this research was that through an in-depth review of the literature, it was revealed that although there had been a lot of research done in the western countries with reference to BL, the number of studies made in Vietnam in this field was still limited. Therefore, this study is expected to make a timely contribution to the existing body of knowledge regarding BL in the context of Vietnam.

Last but not least, from my own observations, the shift from conventional face-to-face English learning to BL seemed to cause some challenges to the students. Therefore, it really elicited my curiosity about what factors facilitated and what factors hampered their learning in blended environments

* 1. Research aims and research questions

The aim of this study is to explore the factors that may contribute to or hinder students’ learning in an English blended course in Vietnamese context so that both the teachers and the policy makers can identify which needs to be improved and which should continue to be promoted.

To achieve these aims, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do the students in the blended course perceive the factors contributing to their learning outcome in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes?
2. How do the students in the blended course perceive the factors hindering their learning outcome in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes?

In this study, contributing factors could be understood as those perceived by students to enhance their knowledge, skills or positive attitude towards their learning. On the contrary, the hindering factors were those that were perceived to have negative impacts on students’ attitude towards their learning and towards the blended course or prevent their knowledge acquisition or skill enhancement.

* 1. **Scope of the study**

This study focused on revealing the factors affecting students’ learning in an English blended course in a higher education institution of Vietnam. It was assumed that not only the students themselves, but also other social and cultural factors contributed to their knowledge construction during their learning in this blended course. Therefore, in order to shed light on those factors, this study was conducted from the lens of the sociocultural perspective, which supposes that knowledge is socially mediated and personally constructed (Engeström, 1987; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Leont’ev, 1981; Wenger, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978).

Besides, this study concentrated on uncovering the factors affecting students’ learning process in an English blended course from their own perspectives. Therefore, the perspectives of other stakeholders such as teachers, system developers, administrators were not taken into consideration.

* 1. **Significance of the Study**

This study made its contribution to theory, methodology and practicality in second language education.

Theoretically, this research contributed greatly to the relevant literature in the field of BL research in Vietnamese higher education contexts. Vietnam is still at an initial stage of implementation; therefore, there are insufficient number of studies concerning BL effectiveness and factors affecting its implementation in the context of Vietnam.

Methodologically, the contribution of the study lied in the employment of *Complex Adaptive Blended Learning Systems (CABLS)* suggested by Wang et al. (2015) as a theoretical and analytical framework in a qualitative method research to explore the factors affecting students’ learning in a blended environment.

Practically, the significance of this study was related to the practical implementations of the findings. The findings of this study were expected to make its contribution to enhance the effectiveness of blended courses in higher education in the future not only in one university but also in other universities in Vietnam and other countries which have similar HE contexts.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Understandings of “Blended learning”

Up to now, “Blended learning” has been a controversial term and an agreement in defining BL does not seem to be reached although many attempts have been made to clarify this term (Graham, 2013; Mayadas & Picciano, 2007; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005; Picciano & Seaman, 2009; Vaughan, 2007).

In its broadest sense, BL was often defined as “the combination of traditional face-to-face and technology-mediated learning” (Graham et al., 2013, p.4). However, this definition seemed to be too broad; therefore, many scholars made an attempt to clarify the word “combination” to give their own definitions of BL such as Sharpe et al. (2006), Allan (2007), Bonk and Graham (2012), Graham (2006, 2012, 2013).

Another definition of BL was “an instructional approach that substitutes online learning for a portion of the traditional face-to-face instructional time” (Owston, 2013, p.1). Some scholars endeavored to decide what proportion of course content delivered online was used to define BL. According to the Sloan Consortium, ‘blended’ courses have 30-79% of course content delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2010, cited in Hrastinski, 2019).

Some other scholars took the quality of the blended courses into consideration when defining BL. For example, Graham (2013) mentioned BL as “a tool for transformational change” (p334). Other researchers who tried to define BL in this way include Garrison and Kanuka (2004), Garrison and Vaughan (2008).

In this dissertation, for the purpose to explore the factors affecting students’ blended learning, the researcher decided to choose the following definition by Bliuc, Goodyear, and Ellis (2007) as the working definition: “*Blended learning’ describes learning activities that involve a systematic combination of co-present (face-to-face) interactions and technologically mediated interactions between students, teachers and learning resources”* (p.234)*.* The reasons underlying this choice is that this definition covers nearly all the fundamental core factors that may affect blended learning efficiency.

**2.2. Factors affecting blended learning**

A review of the literature has disclosed that the factors affecting BL belonged to five main categories including: student-related factors, teacher-related factors, design factors, institution-related factors and other factors (educational, monetary resources, and cultural factors).

With regard to students, some student-related factors are comprised of students’ self-regulatory skills, students’ computer literacy skills, students’ perceptions. Blended courses may provide students with more flexibility in terms of time and space beyond the traditional fixed classes; however, at the same time, it requires students to get used to “working independently, making their own decisions, and taking responsibility for their own learning” (Marsh, 2012, p.12). As a result, BL requires more self-regulated skills for individuals to be successful. (Peverly, Brobst, Graham, & Shaw, 2003). Besides, numerous studies have documented the influence of students’ computer competence in the success of an e-blended course. To illustrate, students with higher computer literacy skills were more likely to have a positive view towards blended learning, which in turns improved their study results. Whereas, students lacking technological skills or being computer-inexperienced were often fearful of using technology in their learning (Coryell & Chlup, 2007). Last but not least, studies have shown that students’ perceptions on BL were interrelated with their learning outcomes (Crawford et al., 1998; López-Pérez, Pérez-López & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011; Owston, York & Murtha, 2013) and their satisfaction with the course (Owston, York & Murtha, 2013; Svanum & Aigner, 2011).

With respect to teachers, previous studies have demonstrated two teacher-related factors including teachers’ knowledge and skills in employing BL, teachers’ attitude and perceptions. Concerning the former, teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and their technological skills are emphasized. Pedagogical knowledge required for a blended course demands that teachers have adequate knowledge of constructivist learning theory which focuses on student-centeredness. If teachers have insufficient pedagogical knowledge, they can not make use of BL to enhance students’ active, reflective and collaborative learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Murphy, 2008; Reinders, 2010; Thanh & Renshaw, 2013). Furthermore, teachers’ technological skills are also a very critical factor in determining the success of BL implementation (Hartman, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2007) because teachers do not only need these skills to design lessons and perform other tasks online, but they also have to support students in need. With reference to teachers’ attitude and perceptions, many researchers reached a consensus that teachers’ perception might impact their judgements, which in turn, affected their teaching behaviors and student learning (Borg, 2009; Gerbic, 2011; Gonzalez, 2010; Lameras et al., 2012; Martin & Ramsden, 1998; Scott, 2014).

The third factor contributing to students’ learning in blended courses is course design dimension. To illustrate, course design influences students’ satisfaction (Lee, 2014) and their perceived learning (Gray & Diloreto, 2016), which in turns affects their academic achievements. The user-friendly and easy-to-use course design with prompt edits and updates make student-teachers perceive its usefulness, engage more in online discussions or inquiry module enthusiastically and deeply understand the inquiry process (Hunt, 2015).

Another factor is related to the institution, which consists of institutional support and institution’s technical infrastructure. Concerning the institutional support, the institution can play a significant role in creating the necessary policy, planning, resources and support systems to enable successful implementation of a BL program (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Sufficient training, mentoring and support is of great help to lecturers who have little experience in online teaching so that they can adopt a blended model successfully (Ndon, 2006). Regarding institution’s technical infrastructure, since BL integrates online components with the employment of computer and web-based technology, low-quality or inadequate facilities will directly affect students’ learning efficiency (Alebaikan, 2010; Chew, 2009; Comas-Quinn, 2011 Ocak, 2011).

Some other factors that were also mentioned in the literature are educational and monetary resources and culture-related factors. Poon (2013) concluded that the availability of educational and monetary resources played an important role in ensuring student outcome. In addition, “Cultures constantly negotiate the unpredictable social consequences of technology on moral, political, cultural and religious values. Accordingly, they either restrict or advance the use of technology” (Al-Harthi, 2005, p. 4). Therefore, whether the implementation of a new educational system, BL, is successful or not relies on the understanding of the cultural aspects of the society.

**2.3. Research trends in Blended learning**

An overview of the research trends concerning BL all over the world and in Vietnam helped the researcher identify the gap that this research needs to fulfill.

Research trends in BL all over the world

About the research trends worldwide, based on some synthesis studies, a panorama of current trends of BL research worldwide during the period from 2000 to 2017 was created. It is revealed that concerning the topical trends, some dominant themes seem to be the focus of researchers of all time such as instructional design, disposition, exploration, learner outcomes, comparison, technology, interaction, demographics, professional development, and others. Although the ranking of each individual theme may differ in different periods of time, instructional design was always in top three most interested topics. One sub-topic of instructional design is BL best practices and BL implementation which also coincides with the ultimate aims of this study. It reconfirms the role of this study to the worldwide body of knowledge in BL in improving the quality of blended courses.

Besides, with relevant to methodological trends, by synthesizing the results from these five articles, it is revealed that research on BL tends to be quantitative. This study contributes to enriching the existing body of knowledge in BL using the qualitative method. Also, as reflected in these review articles, there seems to be a lack of theoretical frameworks which deal directly with BL. This study will offer evidence to the use of Complex Adaptive Blended Learning Systems (CABLS) as an efficient theoretical framework to guide BL research in the future. As suggested by its name, unlike most of the other frameworks and models, this theoretical framework is dedicated to BL. Another conspicuous gap is that there are little publications in BL qualities, teaching and learning experiences, best practices in BL, this study, which is based on students’ perspectives after experiencing a blended course themselves, will discuss the factors affecting their learning and draw some implications to best practices in blended courses.

Moreover, there seems to be a lack of *explain* research, which attempts to investigate causal or correlational relationships between variables within a phenomenon. This study can fill the gap by exploring the relationship between each factor and students’ learning outcome (Students’ knowledge, skills, and attitude)

Research trends in BL in Vietnam

Concerning the research trends in Vietnam, from the review of literature, it is evident that the body of knowledge about BL in Vietnamese context seems to be limited. For example, in terms of topical trends, among 10 primary topics being studied in previous studies all over the world, only four main topics were covered by Vietnamese researchers including studies on instructional design, disposition, exploration and learners’ outcome. This is understandable because Vietnam is still at an initial stage of implementation. This study is a timely contribution to understand more about the implementation of BL in the context of Vietnam in particular and in Asian countries in general.

Besides, though many studies have pointed out the initial positive effects of BL on students’ performances, students and teachers’ satisfaction (Giang & Minh, 2014; Ngan, 2014; Ngoc, 2019; Nhat, Lee, Dung, & Naidu, 2019; Phuong, 2017; Uyen, 2017; Vo, Zhu & Diep, 2017; Yen, Hien & Huyen, 2009) and several researches pointed out the individual factors affecting BL implementation to some extent (Anh, 2019; Dang, Nicholas & Lewis, 2012; Tue, 2015; Hung, Yellishetty, Thanh & Patil, 2017; Yen, Hien & Huyen, 2009), few research provided a comprehensive view of all components of blended learning which contributes to its implementation success. This study is promising in filling this gap by using the *Complex Adaptive Blended Learning Systems (CABLS)* which “enables individualevaluations to focus on specific elements of a blended learningprogram but allows the researchers to see where these elementsare situated within the wider context of blended learning, subsequentlymaking it easier to identify omissions and acknowledge limitations.” (Bowyer & Chambers, 2017, p.22). In addition, this study also made its contribution in discussing some feasible solutions to deal with these limitations.

**2.4. Complex adaptive blended learning system (CABLS)**

The Complex Adaptive Blended Learning Systems, called by CABLS created by Wang, Han, & Yang (2015) with an aim to put forward a comprehensive view of what constitutes blended learning and how various components of blended learning work together over time to achieve an integrated whole (Wang, Han, & Yang, 2015). It consists of six key elements or six subsystems: the learner, the teacher, the technology, the content, the learning support, and the institution. Figure 2.1 gives an illustration of six subsystems and their relationships:

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Figure 2.1: The complex adaptive blended learning system

(Wang, Han, & Yang, 2015, p.383)

In blended learning, this framework has been mainly employed to identify trends and gaps in other blended learning research (Ortner, 2020) such as the studies by Ortner (2021), Wang et al. (2015) or Yeop, Wong & Noh (2016). In this study, due to the research aims to explore contributing and hindering factors to students’ learning in this blended course, each component of the CABLS will be carefully considered to see whether they support or hinder students’ learning. Based on the related concepts in the literature review, some adaptations were made to the original version by Wang, Han, & Yang (2015) to create the analytical framework of this study as follows:

Diagram

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*Table 2.2. The potential facilitating factors/ hindering factors to students’ learning in BL course*

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

Qualitative approach is adopted in this study because this study seems to have nearly all of the distinctive features of a qualitative research which have been synthesized from the studies by different researchers. First of all, this research was conducted in natural setting in which students had just participated in a real and natural English blended course in Vietnam. Secondly, in this study, the researcher plays the role of a key instrument by designing the data collection instruments and collecting the data herself from multiple methods such as interviews and document analysis. Thirdly, each student held their own view of the blended course as well as the facilitating and hindering factors to their learning in this course depending on their own personal and social factors; therefore, the findings reflect participants’ multiple perspectives and meanings. Fourthly, this study is context-dependent because Vietnam is a country deeply influenced by Confucianism, which distinguishes this study from those conducted in other Western-culture contexts. Last but not least, emergent design was employed because the research questions and the interview questions were changed and modified during the process of collecting data to learn about the issues from the students and engage in the best practices to achieve that information, etc.

Among the six most commonly used approaches to doing qualitative research suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), the basic qualitative research was employed as the research design of this study because as stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), the overall purpose of a basic qualitative research is to “*understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p.23), which fits well with this study. This research aims at understanding how students perceive the contributing and hindering factors to their learning in an English blended course. Besides, this study does not belong to other types of qualitative research as mentioned by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) including phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative analysis, and critical qualitative research.

3.2. Research context and participants

The study was conducted in a state university in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, and it can be referred to as a VNUni. This university is chosen because it is a familiar site to the researcher. Besides, this university is still at an early stage of implementing blended learning. In fact, at the Faculty of English in this university, blended learning has just been conducted and integrated into teaching several language subjects since 2018. Therefore, identifying the contributing and hindering factors is of great value to its implementation. In this study, the blended course is offered to non-English major students.

The research participants of this study are 20 first year students attending the blended course in the first semester of 2019-2020 school year. Among them, there are 2 males, 18 females. In terms of English proficiency, 8 students are at intermediate level, 12 students are at pre-intermediate level. They have different years of learning English ranging from 7 years to more than 10 years. They come from different language majors and different classes, and possess various experiences with BL.

3.3. Data collection and data analysis procedures

To serve the purpose of this study, semi-structured interview was employed as a primary data collection instrument and official documents of the university and the faculty will act as a means of triangulation and will supplement the data from the interviews by providing a rich profile of the study context. The interview questions are designed in line with the research questions and the six key subsystems of the chosen theoretical framework (CABLS) including *learner, teacher, technology, content, learning support, institution*. The interview questions aims at digging into students’ perspectives on the impacts of each subsystem of the blended system on their learning in this English blended course and their influencing tendency, from which the facilitating factors as well as the hindering ones can be clearly revealed.

The analyzed documents include the university policies relating to the implementation of the online and blended course including the institutional objectives and strategies for applying blended courses, regulations on teachers and students’ rights and responsibilities in these types of courses, regulations about the university infrastructure, the institutional strategies for enhancing the technology application. Besides, the internal documents of the English faculty relating to blended course objectives, coursebooks, teaching approach, time distribution, course policy and assessment policy, teaching schedule, exam schedule and the instructions for both the teachers and students to make use of LMS were also collected for analysis.

The interview data was collected from 20 first year students during the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020 via Internet (Zoom). All the interviews were carried out in Vietnamese and recorded via recording function of Zoom. Each interview lasted about 45 to 75 minutes depending on each participant. Concerning the documents for analysis, some of them were collected from the official website of the university while some were from internal emails and from faculty administrators and colleagues. This study employed the procedures for analyzing data proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2018) with five clear steps to analyze the data from semi-structured interviews: 1) Organizing and preparing the data for analysis, 2) Reading and looking at all the data, 3) Coding the data, 4) Generating a description and themes, 5) Representing the description and themes. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data from both the interviews and document analysis.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Contributing factors to students’ learning in the current English blended course

4.1.1. Students’ readiness for accommodation of blended learning

Students’ readiness for accommodation of BL was manifested through some subcategories including students’ positive perceptions of BL, their high self-regulatory skills and relatively high technological competence.

The findings revealed that most of the students held a positive perception toward BL. They supposed that the integration of online component enabled them to improve their learning outcomes by providing them with more time for revision, more available supplementary online exercises with available keys, promoting their motivation, etc. Furthermore, BL could enhance their self-study skills because they had more deadlines and more flexibility to study at their convenience. In addition, BL can contribute to students’ improvements in ICT skills. The findings in my study are in agreement with the those from previous studies in terms of students’ positive perceptions about blended learning (Yen, Hien & Huyen, 2019; Bùi, 2019; Huynh & Nguyen, 2019; Vu, 2014). This is a contributing factor because “student attitudes and perceptions towards the learning process could be important in determining how well they learn.” (Wenger,1991, p.121).

In this study, except for task-strategies, students demonstrated rather high self-regulatory skills in nearly all other subskills including time-management skills, environment- structuring, goal- setting, help-seeking, self-evaluation. More than a half of the students felt quite comfortable with their time arrangement to learn in the blended course and most of them were using certain strategies to manage their time. They also reported that they would choose a place and a time carefully to study comfortably in order to make the most of their study time. With reference to goal setting, nearly all of the students set clear immediate goals or long-term goals. They also employed several techniques to monitor their goal achievement such as using google calendar, sticky notes, reminding applications, note-taking. Similarly, most students were willing to ask their teachers and friends for help when they were in need, not to mention that they also sought help from their roommates or foreign friends. Nearly all of the students admitted that they often self-evaluate their study despite the difference in their frequency. In short, the majority of Vietnamese students seemed to be quite self-regulated in their learning. The results echo those from another quantitative study by Hien (2020) but are in contrast with the findings in most of other previous studies which showed that Vietnamese students’ self-regulated capacities may pose a lot of challenges to blended learning implementation and students’ learning success (Thao, Thai, Thanh, Tran, & Vuong, 2019; Tran Duc & Williamson, 2009).

Another factor facilitating students’ learning in the English blended course is their possession of rather high technological competence. They reported that they had no trouble with using computers, using the web and additional softwares. Only three students expressed their lack of confidence when dealing with computers and technology. Students emphasized that technological competence helped them save a lot of time when studying in this course and increased their learning motivation. This finding is in accordance with a large number of studies in the literature which have pointed out that computer competence is a statistically predictor of student outcome and affect students’ satisfaction (Hara & Kling, 2001; Hong & Samimy, 2010). The lack of technological skills or experiences with technology may lead to a fear of using technology in their learning (Coryell & Chlup, 2007). My study presented some contradictory results to the those from previous studies in which learners’ technological competence is a hindering factor to BL because students had to struggle to confidently use the online learning components when learning in a blended environment (Moskal & Cavanagh, 2013; Reinders, 2012; Taylor & Newton, 2013) or face with technical problems when studying online (Chew, 2009; Grgurović, 2010; Larsen, 2012; Moskal & Cavanagh, 2013). In Vietnam, many studies have also shown that students’ experience in blended learning was negatively influenced by technological literacy (Huong, 2018; Yen, Hien & Huyen, 2009; Vu, 2014; Vuong, Tan, & Lee, 2018), however, it turned out to be untrue in my study.

***4.1.2. Teachers’ engagement in BL environment***

Another contributing factor to students’ learning in this blended course was their teachers’ enthusiastic engagement in BL environment. This is demonstrated through teachers’ effort to create a supportive learning discourse to motivate students in class, teacher’s encouragement to students’ collaborative learning, teachers’ attempts to provide regular and elaborate feedbacks for students, prepare useful and suitable course content for students, and supply enthusiastic learning support to them.

All interviewees shared that in face-to-face class, their teachers did not only impart knowledge but also organize a lot of different activities to increase students’ interest as well as their engagement in the lessons. Some of these activities in class included a variety of games, group discussion, role play, etc. Besides, some teachers employed their own personal learning experience or life experience to attract their students and make the class atmosphere more comfortable and relieved. The others employed some interesting forms of reward and punishment to give students some kinds of encouragement. Thanks to the teachers, students seemed to enjoy a comfortable and totally supportive atmosphere when they study in class. It helped them feel more secure, motivated and easier to share their learning needs.

Furthermore, teachers seemed to use different techniques to encourage collaborative learning among their students. Firstly, all the teachers organized a lot of pair work and group work for students to play game, exchange ideas in a group discussion, or solve a problem. Secondly, teachers assign students to different project activities. Thirdly, they encouraged their students to share their ideas, information or learning materials with other students in class. Fourthly, many students reported that their teachers often asked them to carry out peer-assessment to promote collaboration, especially in writing skill. Thanks to these activities, students’ intrinsic motivation to learn, their learning outcome and their soft skills such as communication skills or task division skills was reported to improve.

In addition, teachers’ engagement in BL environment was also manifested through their effort to provide regular and elaborate feedbacks for students. Most students commented that the feedbacks were quite detailed in terms of vocabulary, grammar, structures, etc. with clear suggestions for improvement. Nearly all of them agreed that teachers’ feedback supported their self-identification process. For example, it enabled students to realize their strengths and weaknesses, where needs to improve and how to improve. Besides, it helped to enhance students’ language knowledge and skills thanks to memorizing the mistakes, gaining experiences and being oriented. All in all, teachers’ regular and elaborate feedbacks really motivated students and facilitated their study in the English blended course.

Teachers’ indispensable role in students’ learning in this blended course was also revealed through their effort to prepare useful and suitable course content for students. Although teachers did not have much experience with BL, they made great efforts to prepare the course content for students, which resulted in students’ satisfaction and positive attitude towards both the offline and online content of the current blended course. In terms of offline content, or the textbooks used in class, most of the students indicated that the books which were designed as topic-based provided students with variety of useful background knowledge and motivated the students to learn. Besides, many students commented that textbooks helped to improve students’ learning outcome by enhancing students’ vocabulary and grammar and promoting students’ English skills through its scientific and systematic organization. Similar to the offline content of the blended course, when evaluating the activities and exercises on LMS, most of the interviewees agreed that the design of the activities was appropriate with clear, easy-to-follow instructions. Nearly all of the students (19 students) thought that the difficulty level of the tasks was completely suitable for them. They also admitted the online and offline activities were compatible with and supportive to each other to some extent. In short, the integration of online learning content in the blended course provided students with extra learning resources for extra revision, which helped to improve students’ learning outcomes. Besides, it helped to carefully prepare students for the exam because the learning content of the online exercises and the exam content were closely relevant to each other.

Last but not least, teachers’ active engagement in this blended course was also reflected in their effort to provide enthusiastic learning support to students. With respect to teachers’ academic support to promote students’ effective learning strategies, teachers employed some techniques to develop students’ ability to take control of their own learning. Firstly, teachers provided students with clear course orientation and guidelines such as course objectives, learning expectations, methods of assessment and examination right at the beginning of the course. Secondly, many interviewees (nearly a half) said that besides LMS, the teachers encouraged their students to make use of individual language study tools, softwares and learning platforms available online such as famous IELTS, TOEFL websites, online dictionaries or reference books to improve English proficiency and skills. Thirdly, many teachers introduced some detailed guidelines to train them how to self-study at home where there was an absence of teachers and peers. Fourthly, some students reported that their teachers asked them to carry out self-assessment. With reference to technical support, teacher’s support was manifested in a number of ways. First of all, some teachers carefully instructed their students how to get access to the online system. In addition, during students’ learning process, if they had any technical problem with their learning, teachers seemed to be always available there to give timely support. Furthermore, teachers also introduced some other learning platforms for students to self-study or some essential useful technological software that could be employed in doing their projects. All in all, the majority of the students agreed that teachers’ support was a crucial facilitating factor in their learning in this blended environment. For example, teachers’ academic support gave clear orientation to them in their study in this course and enabled students to acquire knowledge more easily and more effectively. Similarly, teachers’ technical support provided students with easy access to the learning system.

In conclusion, in my study, students’ responses demonstrated that teachers’ active engagement in BL environment was one facilitating factor which had positive impacts on students’ learning. The findings of this study help to confirm teachers’ significant role in students’ learning in blended environments that have been popularly reflected in literature review (Hung & Chou, 2015). Many previous studies have indicated that teachers can be a hindering factor to students’ learning and the implementation of BL due to their negative viewpoints of BL and their reluctance to implement it (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Benson, Anderson, & Ooms, 2011; Korr, Derwin, Greene, & Sokoloff, 2012; Joosten et al., 2013). However, their enthusiastic engagement in the course proves to be a facilitating factor which is beneficial to students’ learning in different way in this new environment.

***4.1.3. Institution’s advocacy of blended implementation***

Institution’s advocacy of blended implementation is one contributing factor to students’ learning in this blended course. It is demonstrated in three sub-categories including positive institutional strategy, positive institutional structure, technical and professional training and support for teachers.

In terms of institutional strategy, data from both the document analysis and the interviews indicated that the institution provided the teachers and students with a clear definition of blended learning as well as its components to prevent any possible misunderstanding. Also, the purpose and expectations of the blended course or the goals of the course were clearly stated.

With reference to institutional structure, some subcategories are presented in this section consisting of infrastructure, scheduling, evaluation, and professional development. The document analysis and students’ responses showed that this university has a carefully invested technological infrastructure with a well-organized online training and support system. Especially, students expressed positive attitudes towards the Learning Management System (LMS) with its smooth asynchronous functions. Thanks to this, students could easily search for reference materials. Their study became more flexible, convenient and timesaving and it promoted their motivation to study because they could get access to multiple learning methods. Besides, the institution has clear communication of the scheduling of blended courses and explicit course policy and assessment to make it easier for both the teachers and students to follow. The student-feedback-taking activities about the modules, teaching methods, and educational environments were also carried out regularly.

Finally, regarding technical and professional training and support for teachers, the institution made an effort to create a favorable condition for teachers and promote them to teach in blended courses by providing a lot of training and support for them.

These results appear to contradict to those reflected in other studies in the context of Vietnam. To illustrate, a number of research in Vietnam have indicated that the directions and strategies to support the employment of ICT in education in some institutions are very ambiguous, insufficient and not well-established (Tue, 2015; Peeraer et al., 2009; Thu, 2011; Thu et al., 2012). As a result, the goals of ICT integration and clear steps of BL implementation are not clearly stated which makes both the teachers and program leaders confused sometimes. Besides, much research pinpointed limited access to ICT resources for both teachers and students (Huong, 2009; Ngan, 2019; Thu et al., 2012). Those studies also reveal a lack of support and training for teachers during their teaching process in blended environment (Tue, 2015; Thu, 2011; Thu et al., 2012). In my study, the institution endeavored to create the most favorable conditions for both teachers and students and its advocacy was a contributing factor to students’ learning in this blended course.

4.2. Hindering factors to students’ learning in the current English blended course

4.2.1. Students’ insufficient preparation to learn in BL environments

Although students were ready to learn this environment, there were still some aspects which demonstrated their insufficient preparation for this course including their misunderstanding and limited experiences with BL, and their limited English proficiency

From the interviews, BL was still unfamiliar with many students, and they often misunderstood its definition or mistook it for other forms of learning. Most of the students had not heard about this term and experienced it until they entered the university. In some other cases, students had heard about this term but in fact, they had not had a chance to experience it before. Students pinpointed that their inexperience with the course was one of the barriers to their study for several reasons. They included homework missing, students’ negative emotional engagement, time consumption and lack of effective learning strategies to learn well in this blended course. This finding is consonant with cognitive constructivism theory, which supposes that a learner’s personal experience deeply affects the building up of his or her knowledge. This is reconfirmed by Meyer (2003), who supposed that individual students learned at different rates due to differing experiences.

Besides, students’ English proficiency was limited, which hampered their study in different ways. It prevented them from actively interacting with their teachers or participating in the lessons in offline class and discovering new knowledge in English themselves, restricted students’ learning support to each other in offline or online environment and caused trouble for them when they studied online because the LMS was designed totally in English. This finding coincides with those in previous studies in the context of Vietnam which concluded that one of the barriers to the application of CLT is students’ low English competence (Bock, 2000; Hiep, 2007; Hoa, 2009; Lewis & McCook, 2002).

4.2.2. Incompatibility between Vietnamese cultural attributes and blended learning model

Another hindering factor to students’ learning in this blended course is incompatibility between Vietnamese cultural attributes and BL model, which affected not only students’ learning habit but also teachers’ teaching habit.

Due to cultural influences, students seemed to have restricted interactions with both teachers and peers, which had negative effect on their learning progress such as their knowledge acquisition process, their emotional engagement in the course or their social life. Based on Hofstede’s cultural framework (Hofstede, 2010; Hofstede et al., 2010), students’ restricted interactions with their teachers and their friends within the blended course may reflect the characteristics of a strong uncertainty avoidance culture, which is consonant with the findings in previous studies conducted by Binh (2012), Mai et al., (2005), Xuan (2013). Besides, it demonstrates the features of a large-power-distance country with rather high inequality between teachers and students (Tuong, 2002). Finally, Vietnamese students’ interaction with teachers and peers exhibits the characteristic of a highly collectivistic society in which members often operate in a closely knit social groups and they were unwilling to speak up in larger groups, or a group of “relative strangers” or “out-group members” (Huong, 2015, p.108).

Cultural influences also led to their tendency to depend on their teachers for learning motivation and direction, which deterred them from making their own decision on what and how to learn. Most of the students still seemed to consider teachers as the main source of knowledge transmission and motivation. This result corresponds to those of previous studies in Vietnam indicating that Vietnamese students often tend to rely on the teachers for both learning motivation and content acquisition (Danh & Williamson, 2009; Huyen, 1995; Mai, Terlouw & Pilot, 2005; Tuong, 2002). This habit had negative influence on students’ learning in this blended course because it led to students’ underestimation of the value of self-study in blended environment. They tended to believe that self-study might cause misunderstanding, misleading or unverified information or time consumption, etc. The finding resonated with previous studies which supposed that such a cultural feature may have negative impact on students’ learning because they are more likely to work towards quiet learning, respecting attentiveness and compliance with the teachers (Chin, 2015). This is opposite to the requirement of BL for students’ active learning (Alebaikan, 2010).

Another obvious impact of cultural influences on students’ learning in this course was that a lot of students were under exam pressure. They often experienced a sense of nervousness because they were fear of getting low marks, failing or having to retake the exam. This mental state had negative psychological impact on them, which then badly influenced their academic performance and resulted in their bad results. The finding is consistent with previous studies in Vietnam (Anh, 2004; Tue, 2015; Lewis & McCook, 2002).

These features of Vietnamese culture reflected in students’ learning may demonstrate some conflicts with the requirements for success in a blended environment. While BL requires students to be more self-regulated (Peverly, Brobst, Graham, & Shaw, 2003) in managing time and motivating, controlling, directing independent reflective learning (Alebaikan, 2010; Moskal & Cavanagh, 2013; Stracke, 2007), most of the Vietnamese students tend to be passive, teacher- dependent (Tue, 2015; Chin, 2015) due to the hierarchy in a high power- distance culture. Besides, BL is expected to develop students’ collaborative learning better by creating more communication opportunities for students to interact with their teachers and peers both outside and inside class. While BL pedagogies totally align with the Western students’ learning style because their communication needs are so strong to satisfy their individualism, Vietnamese students tend to be more reserved to communicate and have a reticent way of learning due to the imprint of a collectivist culture and the doctrines of Confucianism (Samovar et al., 2014).

The cultural influences are not only demonstrated in students’ learning habit but also in teachers’ teaching habit and affected students’ learning to some extent. In a large-power-distance country like Vietnam, the conventional teaching pedagogy characterized by knowledge transmission and teacher-centeredness seemed to be dominant and it is found to exert huge impact on teachers’ understanding as well as practices of BL. From students’ responses, most of the teachers spent a relatively large amount of time presenting the new knowledge to their students in class. This finding is consistent with those in many previous studies, which supposed that teacher-centered approach remained teachers’ dominant teaching methods in Vietnam Vietnam (Canh, 2011, 2015; Hong, Warren & Fehring, 2014; Hoa, 2009). However, as mentioned earlier, in order to implement blended learning successfully, it is vital that teachers’ pedagogical approach be switched from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness which is facilitative of students’ active and collaborative learning. (COHERE, 2011; Niemiec & Otte, 2010; Picciano, 2006; Riley et al., 2013; Sanprasert, 2010; Vaughan, 2007).

In short, both Vietnamese students’ learning habit and teachers’ teaching habit reflect some incompatibility between Vietnamese cultural attributes and some requirements of BL model, which may act as a barrier to students’ learning success in this new environment.

4.2.3. Institution-related issues

Some institution-related issues which may hinder students’ learning included untapped potentials of blended learning, lack of visible teaching in online component of the English blended course, lack of institutional training and support for students.

From the interviews with the students, it seemed to be that some potentials of BL hadn’t been made full use of due to some limitations of LMS which could not support students’ active and collaborative learning. For example, the LMS lacked synchronous communication tools to create more opportunities for students to communicate in English or participate in collaborative learning online. It resulted in students’ restricted opportunities to interact with their teachers and peers. Besides, in terms of course content on LMS, there seemed to be a lack of authentic tasks in speaking and writing skills that really promoted students’ creativity instead of only some drills. Also, students mentioned the lack of feedback function for writing and speaking skill. As a result, most of the students attributed their progress in these two skills to the face-to-face sessions rather than the online component of the blended course. Some other system mistakes were related to the marking function of the system or the design of the tasks. It seemed to be that the LMS was mainly used to replicate existing pedagogical practice characterized by knowledge transmission and teacher-centeredness to regulate students’ learning beyond face-to-face classes, with primary focus on the acquisition of language forms through drill and practice. This finding echoes with those in previous research such as Canh (2011), Hiep (2005) and Hoa (2009).

Besides, there exist some contradictions between teachers’ roles mentioned in the institution’s documents and their real role in practice. Students’ responses demonstrated a lack of visible teaching in online component of the English blended course*.* The main role of teachers in online component of this blended course was to encourage and monitor students’ completion of online learning exercises. They seemed to play no part in in encouraging students’ online collaborative learning and providing constructive feedback for students online in spite of the time constraints and large class size in offline class. This finding is consistent with those in Tue (2015). The reasons may vary. They may have insufficient understanding and expertise to work with blended learning (Alebaikan, 2010; Chew, 2009; Dziuban, Hartman, Juge, Moskal & Sorge, 2006; Taylor & Newton, 2013; Vaughan, 2007). In some other cases, they may not be technologically competent enough to monitor students’ online learning activities (Alebaikan, 2010; Chew, 2009; Dziuban, Hartman, Juge, Moskal & Sorg, 2006; Taylor & Newton, 2013; Vaughan, 2007) or they may be ignorant of many online technological applications employed in EFL education (Huong, 2009; Thu, 2011), etc. Whatever the reason is, it should be noted that the institution must be responsible for giving sufficient training for teachers in terms of knowledge and skills as well as creating an optimum condition for them to make use of BL

Finally, institution-related issues are related to lack of institutional training and support for students. On the contrary to the teachers who received considerable support from the institution in terms of finance, technical and professional training; however, not much support for students was recorded. This phenomenon may reflect the lack of organizational understanding of blended learning in which pedagogical approach needs to be switched from teacher-centredness to student-centredness (Tue, 2015; Niemiec & Otte, 2010; Picciano, 2006; Riley et al., 2013; Sanprasert, 2010; Vaughan, 2007).

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1. Overview of the study

This study aims at exploring the factors that may contribute to or hinder students’ learning in an English blended course in Vietnamese context from students’ perspectives.

My research was designed to answer two main research questions:

1. How do the students in the blended course perceive the factors contributing to their learning outcome in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes?
2. How do the students in the blended course perceive the factors hindering their learning outcome in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes?

In order to answer these two research questions, this research adopted a qualitative approach, a basic qualitative research design with interviews as the main data collection tool supported by the document analysis. The semi-structed interviews were carried out with 20 first year students of 2019-2020 school year who had just experienced the English blended course in the first semester. The documents for analysis were official documents including university policies relating to the implementation policy of blended course, faculty documents concerning specific instructions to employing and managing the current course or course outlines and schedules. The data were collected in alignment with six subsystems of the Complex Adaptive Blended Learning System (CABLS) framework, and then thematically analyzed to explore the factors affecting students’ learning in the blended environment. The findings can be summarized as follows:

*Research question 1: How do the students in the blended course perceive the factors contributing to their learning outcome in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes?*

Concerning the factors that facilitate students’ learning in the current English blended course, data collected from the interviews with students and document analysis indicated that there were 3 main contributing factors including students’ readiness for accommodation of blended learning, teachers’ active engagement in BL environment, and institution’s advocacy of blended learning implementation. Firstly, students’ readiness was manifested through their positive perceptions of BL, their relatively high self-regulatory skills, and their high technological competence. Secondly, teachers’ active engagement was reflected in their effort to create supportive learning discourse to motivate students, encourage collaborative learning, provide regular and elaborate feedback for students, prepare useful and suitable course content for students, and provide enthusiastic learning support to students in terms of both academic and technical support. Thirdly, institution’s advocacy of blended implementation was manifested in positive institutional strategy, positive institutional structure, technical and professional training and support for teachers.

*Research question 2: How do the students in the blended course perceive the factors hindering their learning outcome in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes?*

With respect to the factors that hampered student’s learning in this English blended course, three key hindering factors were revealed: students’ insufficient preparation to learn in BL environments, Incompatibility between some Vietnamese cultural attributes and BL model, and some institution-related issues.

As regards students, many of them did not have proper understanding of BL and most of them had limited experiences with BL. Moreover, their degree of English proficiency was not high enough for them to feel confident to study in this English blended course.

Another hindering factor, which had a profound influence on nearly all subsystems of BL environment, was the incompatibility between Vietnamese cultural attributes and BL model. The cultural influences were imprinted in both students’ learning habit and teachers’ teaching habit. For example, most of the students in this study were under exam pressure, teacher-dependent and had restricted interactions with their teachers and other students. Also due to high-power-distance culture, most of the teachers still maintained teacher-centered pedagogy and played the main role as knowledge transmitter and the decision maker regarding what students learn and how they learn. Both students’ learning habit and teachers’ teaching habit are inappropriate for the requirements for success in a blended environment.

Last but not least, some institution-related issues also negatively affect students’ learning in this blended course to some extent. In the first place, the untapped potentials of blended learning resulting from the shortcomings of the LMS seemed to impede students’ active and collaborative learning in this blended environment. In the second place, lack of visible teaching in online component of the English blended course resulted in insufficient feedback and opportunities for students to interact with their teachers and classmates due to time constraint and large class size in offline class. Finally, lack of institutional training and support for students before and during the blended course also led to their unfamiliarity and insufficient preparation for this new learning environment.

5.2. Implications for EFL blended learning implementation at Vietnamese universities

5.2.1. Implications for teachers

This study provides substantial evidence that it is crucial that teachers themselves should raise their own awareness of the significance of moving away from their existing traditional teacher-centered pedagogy to student-centered one because developing a more student-centered pedagogical approach which addresses students’ different learning needs and facilitates their active and collaborative learning is considered to be a key contributor to the effectiveness of BL implementation (Marsh, 2012; Niemiec & Otte, 2010; Sanprasert, 2010; Vaughan, 2007). Only when they have acknowledged the importance of this shift, do they endeavor to make radical changes in their current pedagogical practices.

Secondly, this study also indicates that teachers must acknowledge the potentials of blended learning to assist teachers improve their pedagogical practices. For example, the employment of online communication tools with both synchronous and asynchronous functions can support teachers in enhancing students’ active and collaborative learning. It is advisable for teachers to take advantage of online communication and assessment tools to give students individualized feedback or assistance and promote collaborative learning beyond class.

Thirdly, this study suggests that teachers should gain a deep understanding of their students such as their English proficiency, their technological competence or their learning habits to give appropriate support.

5.2.2. Implications for institutions

At university level, evidence from this study shows that blended learning can be applicable in this university because students were ready for the accommodation of BL to some extent and the teacher got actively engaged in the blended course. Moreover, the social context of Vietnam and the institutional context of this university at the time seem to be very supportive of the integration of ICT in education. Therefore, it is advisable for the institution to make use of all these favorable conditions to develop future blended courses.

In addition, the findings of this study implies that the institution should revise the policies relating to prior and ongoing professional and technical support for both teachers and students to enhance the effectiveness of the BL implementation. As for teachers’ lack of visible teaching in online component of the English blended course, the institution must be responsible for giving sufficient training for teachers in terms of knowledge and skills as well as creating an optimum condition for them to make use of BL. In addition, it is vital that the institution gain some understanding of their teachers concerning what they have already known and successfully implemented as well as what is still unknown to them to revise the training session to meet their needs. Furthermore, many Vietnamese students still suffered from limited prior knowledge and experience with BL, lack of strategies to learn in blended course, cultural influences on learning habit characterized by exam-pressure, teacher-dependence, restricted interaction with teachers and other students, etc. Therefore, it is imperative that the institution’s policies should be revised to pay more attention to the students.

Besides, this study indicates that a lot of existing problems with the LMS lead to the consequences that some potentials of BL in promoting students’ active, reflective and collaborative learning were still untapped. Therefore, it is crucial that the institution organize the training courses for both teachers and the program administrators so that they can fully understand the potentials of BL and know how to design the LMS to harness these potentials. At the same time, the institution needs to carry out ongoing and periodical evaluation of the BL implementation which incorporates the opinions of all the stakeholders, especially the students to make timely adjustments to the course.

Last but not least, this study points to the strong influence of culture in nearly all aspects of this blended course. It is vital that this factor be taken into consideration by the institution prior to the implementation of any blended course so that the negative impacts caused by the conflicts between the Vietnamese culture features and the requirements of BL course can be considered and diminished.

5.3. Suggestions for further studies

As suggested by the limitations of this study, it is suggested that future studies should employ mixed method with the integration of both the qualitative and quantitative data to validate the findings.

Besides, it is also recommended that *Complex Adaptive Blended Learning Systems (CABLS)* should continue to be used in future studies when exploring the contributing and hindering factors to students’ learning in blended environments because it gives a comprehensive view of all components of blended learning, based on which all the affecting factors can be revealed.

Furthermore, future studies should integrate the observations as a data collection tool to collect the data from actual teaching and learning practices instead of only depending on self-reported data as in this study. The factors revealed would be more objective and reliable.

Also, as mentioned above, this study was conducted in the context of only one university of Hanoi, Vietnam. Therefore, other studies should continue to be conducted in other settings such as in other universities, or high schools, secondary schools, etc., to give richer descriptions of the factors affecting Vietnamese students’ learning in blended courses. From these results, the institution-related factors can also be clarified at the same time.

Finally, cultural influence is found to be a noticeable factor affecting Vietnamese students’ learning in blended environment in this research because it has an impact on nearly all aspects of the course. Therefore, it would be advisable for future researchers to carry out more research to dig into the influence of CHC on the implementation of BL.

THESIS-RELATED PUBLICATIONS

1. Hiền, N.T.T. (2017). Học tập kết hợp trong giáo dục đại học- Thuận lợi và thách thức. Proceedings of National 2017 Graduate Research Symposium, ULIS-VNU, 193-204.
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