EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Blended Learning in Post-Covid 19 Period

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Abstract: *The studyseeks to understandVietnamese highschool EFL teachers' perspectives regarding the effects of blended learning (BL) approach when applied in EFL settings, and its preventing factors after the Covid-19 pandemic has been under control. Participants of the study were 32 EFL teachers from local high schools in a provincein Northern Vietnam. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were the primary sources of information. The questionnaires were disseminated to accumulate massive opinions from teachers, while in-depth interviews were conducted with three teachers to look for further details into the findings. The outcomes of the study showed thatteachers hold positive opinions regarding the effects of blended learning in EFL settings and unanimously agreed on its potential to facilitate English learning and acquisition.Teachersalso shared some challenges in BL application and provided suggestions regarding what is necessary for successful BL application in the local teaching context.*

Key Words:*Teachers' perspectives, Blended learning, Effects of Blended learning, Difficulties of Blended learning*

I. Introduction

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift from traditional classroom-based learning to online and blended learning, which defined more dependence upon the involvement of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) in classrooms in general (Maru et al., 2021) and in English as a foreign language (EFL) setting in particular. Though at the present time, Covid 19 in under control in the world, educationalists argue that we can never get back to where we were before the pandemic, especially after a mushrooming of ed-tech tools during the pandemic and the fact thatmany studies on technology integration have confirmed the use of technology in educational settings is beneficial to students (Gulbahar, 2007; Kim &Hannafin, 2011). However, most teachers only use technology to design instructional materials (Hermans et al., 2008, 2008) or deliver lectures but do not effectively integrate technology into teaching and learning (Gorder, 2008). Since teacher beliefs play critical roles in successful technology integration (Ertmer, 1999,2005; Hermans et al., 2008; Niederhauser& Stoddart, 2001; Tondeur, van Keer, van Braak, & Valcke, 2008) or influence technology use indirectly (Chen, Y.-L., 2008), an investigation into teachers' perspectives regarding teaching and learning beliefs are essential because it can provide the researchers evidence for predicting the shape of education in these teachers' context.

The combination of online and traditional forms of teaching and learning, which constitutes blended learning (BL), is supposed to be the trend in the new normal era. More importantly, it is widely recognized that students from Gen Z are born to be digital natives whose lives have been surrounded by technology, social media, mobile devices, computers, and the Internet, ICT integration is indispensable in current and future education. In EFL settings, ICT also provides students with ample benefits. Driven by this, the researcher of the current study would like to investigate teachers' perspectiveson the effects of blended learning in EFL teaching and learning in the Post-Covid-19 period, and to understand the challenges in the application of blended learning in the local teaching context. Besides, since most of the previous studies focus on BL in tertiary education, the researcher decided to investigate the high-school EFL teachers' perspectives towards BL approach with a view to providing the viewpoints of educators in a more diverse context.

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1. Literature Review

Benefits of blended learning in EFL context

BL has been proven to create multiple benefits to students. Albiladi and Alshareef (2019) after critically reviewing a number of previous studies have concluded that BL benefits students in three main areas including developing language knowledge and skills, enhancing the English learning process, and improving the English learning environment.

Regarding language knowledge and skills, studies by Adas&Bakir (2013); Grgurovic (2011); Ghazizadeh&Fatemipour (2017); and Shih (2010)have shown that blended learning can be used effectively to develop language knowledge (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) and skills including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Similarly,Zhang and Zhu's study (2018) indicated that the use of blended learning had positive impacts on students' general learning outcomes. More specifically, students who followed BL mode had better academic achievement in ESL courses when compared with others taught by the traditional face-to-face mode. Regarding the language knowledge itself, Adas&Bakir (2013) found in their study that blended learning helped develop many aspects ofEnglish knowledge, such as grammar, vocabulary and spelling.This can be explained since with blended learning, students are equipped with rich sources of language learning materials.

In addition to promoting students' language knowledge and skills, BL has been proven to have the potential to develop students' motivation and engagement.In the same token, blended learning strategy was reported to be motivating and inspiriting for language learners. It motivates autonomous learning, increases classroom interactions, and eliminates communication anxiety. Similar findings were reported by another study, Mananand Pandian (2012) who recognized that students were more willing to interact and collaborate in online platforms than in face-to-face lessons. Yoon and Yoon and Lee (2010) in their study also made conclusion that BL increased students' motivation and promoted many significant aspects in language learning such as interaction, autonomy, and collaboration.

The application of BL also helps improve the language learning environment. In Ja'ashan's study (2015) blended learning is perceived by students as more convenient than traditional face-to-face teaching. Banditvilai (2016) conducted a study in an Asian university examining the impacts of BL on English learners' language skills and learning autonomy.The findings of the study indicated that blended solution, which mixes online approach with classroom instruction, enhances the language skills of language learners and improves the learning experience of students. This English language teaching (ELT) approach was reported to enable students to learn and practice their language anytime anywhere, which makes BL approach preferable for language learners since they are allowed to study in a more flexible manner and at their own pace.

Challenges of blended learning in EFL context

Even though research regarding BL focuses on the benefits of this teaching mode, challenges in BL application were reported. Bonk's and Graham's (2006) listed six major issues of BL which are: (1) "The role of live interaction"; (2) "the role of learners' choices and self-regulation"; (3) "models for support and training"; (4) "dealing with the digital divide"; (5) "cultural adaptation"; and (6) "finding balance between innovation and production" (pp.14-16).

Also, Riel et al. (2016) also mentioned six difficulties that teachers encounter during the implementation process of a BL curriculum including students' communication with peers, their self-management, the difficulty in keeping students focused on their tasks, in establishing work expectations, the lack of time to conduct the lesson as well as a time frame to finish the work, the outside-of-classroom challenges and technology challenges.

Blended learning in Vietnamese EFL context

Some studies on BL in Vietnamese context has been conducted. Challenges faced by students, as reported by (Hoang, 2015), most of the students find it challenging to study by themselves. Students' lack of experience in using computers and web-based technology was also a problem (Hoang, 2015).

Vietnamese EFL lecturers also encountered a number of challenges. For example, lecturers are unsure about the blended learning courses' quality due to the extra workload and the unfamiliarity with using some technology-based tools during blended learning courses" (Betts, 2014). The lack of training in implementing technology-based applications in their instructionremained an obstacle (Hoang, 2015).

According Ho et al. (2021), although lecturers and students had positive perceptions of BL since it helps increase the opportunities to learn and develop autonomous learning, Yen and Huyen (2019) imply that to make blended learning more effective in Vietnam context, more teacher involvement should be implemented.

II. Research method

Research questions

The study aims at investigatingteachers' perspectivestowards the effects of BL inpromoting English teaching and learning, and the factors that prevent the application of this approach in EFL settings. Therefore, the research questions proposed were:

What are teachers'perspectives towards the effects of BL on English language teaching and learning?

What are the factors that prevent BL application in their local teaching context?

Research design and procedures

The study follows a mixed research method design to explore teachers' opinions regarding the effects of BL on EFLstudents' English learning. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data while semi-structured interviews were employed for qualitative data.

Participants

32high school EFL teachers from a province in Northern Vietnam were participants in this study. Regarding the background, 62.5% taught in schools in the city and the rest 37.5% worked in rural areas at the time of the survey. Regarding teachers' experience, 100% participants of in the study had from 16 to 25 years of teaching, who can be considered experienced teachers.

With regard to teachers' knowledge and experience with BL, 100% of teachers participating in the study applied BL approach in their teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic in the previous years to a certain extent. Though only 31,3% were trained on how to conduct BL in EFL settings, 75% acknowledged that they self-studied about BL in order to apply it better in their classroom. 56.3% of the participants still remain applying BL for at least one of their classrooms. 68.8% of teachers shared that they regularly use at least an online tool or platform to track students' learning, and stay in touch with them after class hours.

Data collection and analysis

Questionnaires andinterviewsare the primary instruments to collect data for the study. Questionnaires were used to collect massive data regarding teachers' geographical and teaching backgrounds, their experience with BL, and their opinions about the effects of BL on EFL teachers' English teaching and their student's learning. This is also the primary tool to get information about teachers' opinions regarding their challenges for BL application in their teaching context in the new normal period after the Covid19 pandemic and their needs for support to facilitate BL.

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with three teachers. Since the purpose of the interviews is to understand teachers' perspectives to the full, the interview questions were designed in Vietnamese to make sure that teachers find comfortable and can share their deepest thoughts without misunderstanding.

The interviews of the current study consist of six questions, designed to collect information for further explanations regarding their experience with BL, their opinions regarding the effects of BL on their teaching and their students' learning of English, the challenges they had and their suggestions for the feasible application of BL.

III. Findings and discussion

The findings from the questionnaires and interviews are presented in the following part of this study, focusing on the two main areas, which are the effects of BL on English teaching and learning and the preventing factors of BL in the local EFL settings.

Effects of BL on English language teaching and learning

The most important findings from the questionnaire regarding teachers' perspectives on the effects of BL on English teaching and learning are summarized and illustrated in the following tables. The information is organized following three areas according to Albiladi and Alshareef's (2019), including the effects of BM on developing language knowledge and skills, enhancing the English learning process, and improving the English learning environment.

Table 1: Teachers' perspectives regarding the effects of BL on English teaching and learning

Statement	No. of Responses	Percentage (%)
Developing language knowledge and skills		
BL helps students learn English knowledge more effectively.	28	88
BL helps students improve their English skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking)	28	88
Enhancing the English learning process		
BL makes learnings more interesting to students.	24	75
BL providespersonalized learning opportunities for students.	26	81
BL promotes students' responsibility for learning	31	97
BL makes learning more flexible in terms of location and time.	26	81
BL helps enhance learners' autonomy.	32	100
BL enables teachers to track students' self-studying time.	24	75
Improving the English learning environment.		
Students have access to more learning materials.	28	88
BL provides more learning opportunities after class hours.	24	75
BL makes students more willing to share knowledge with others.	23	72
BL enhancesthe interaction between teachers and students after class hours.	24	75
BL enhances the interaction between students and students after class hours.	20	63
BL gives students more access to authentic English learning materials	28	88
Others		
BL helps students improve their technology skills.	28	88
BL gives teachers an opportunity to develop their professionalism.	24	75

As can be seen from the figures in Table 1, teachers shared positive opinions regarding the effects of BL on English language teaching and learning.

Regarding the potentials of BL in developing language knowledge and skills, 88% of the respondents agreed that BL approach helps students learn English knowledge and skills more effectively. This advocates the findings of previous studies by Adas&Bakir (2013); Grgurovic (2011); Ghazizadeh&Fatemipour (2017); and Shih (2010), which also reported on the improvement of students' English knowledge and skills after the intervention of BL in their classes.

Regarding the impacts of BL on enhancing the English learning process, the majority of survey responses were also positive, which implies that teachers found BL effective in improving the learning process. More specifically, 100% of the participants in this study agreed that BL encouraged students to be more autonomous learners. 97% of them agreed that BL made students more responsible for learning. This agrees with the findings of Liu (2013) who found that BL was reported to be motivating and inspiring for language learners. In the interview, teacher A also informed that "BL gives students more opportunities to continue studying after the class hours" and she also recognized that her students "became more active and more like autonomous learners" (Teacher A)

Another finding is that 75% of participants in the study recognized that BL makes learning more attractive and interesting to students. Besides, BL enables teachers to track student self-studying time, which is an advantage over the traditional ways of teaching when it is hard for teachers to control and track students' self-studying. Teacher A also shared in the interview that BL allowed her to see her students' time of learning, the number of tasks students have done, and "their level of participation".

Also, according to the survey, 81% of teachers agreed that BL allows personalized learning opportunities for students and makes learning more flexible in terms of location and time, which makes learning a better experience for students since each has their own pace of learning and students have the right to decide the time they find the best to learn and the place where they would like to sit. This partly makes BL approach preferable for language learners (Moskal and Cavanagh, 2013)

Considering the final area of BL impacts on English teaching and learning, teachers also agreed that BL has the potential to improve the English learning environment in a number of ways. First, 88% of teachers agreed that BL allows students more access to online learning materials. A little smaller number of teachers accounting for 75%, agreed that BL provides more learning opportunities after class hours for the students. BL also makes the students, even the introvert ones, more willing to share knowledge with others. BL was also reported to enhance the interaction between teachers and students as well as between students and students after

class hours. These findings are aligned with those of Liu's study (2013) which concluded that BL encourages classroom interactions and eliminates communication anxiety Liu (2013). Similar results were reported in another study by Manan, Alias, and Pandian (2012) who recognized that students were more willing to interact and collaborate on online platforms than in face-to-face lessons.

One more advantage of BL in improving the learning environment is that it gives students more access to English learning materials, especially authentic ones, with 88% of teachers sharing their agreement.

Regarding other effects of BL on EFL settings, from teachers' perspectives, BL helps students improve their technology skills, with 88% of the respondents agreeing on that. For EFL teachers, BL provides them with an opportunity to develop their professionalism (75%).

In the interview, teachers confirmed their positive perspectives towards BL in EFL settings. A teacher claimed that BL "increases interaction, promotes critical thinking, makes students active in learning." Besides, BL "creates a continuous learning environment" since students could learn at any time, from anywhere. (Teacher B)

From the summary of the findings, it can be concluded that teachers hold positive opinions over the effects of BL on English teaching and learning. BL significantly facilitates language knowledge and skills development, enhancing the English learning process and improving the English learning environment.

Factors preventing BL application

Findings from the survey have also revealed the challenges in BL implementation in the EFL classrooms. The factors preventing the BL application in the local teaching context are summarized and illustrated in the following chart.
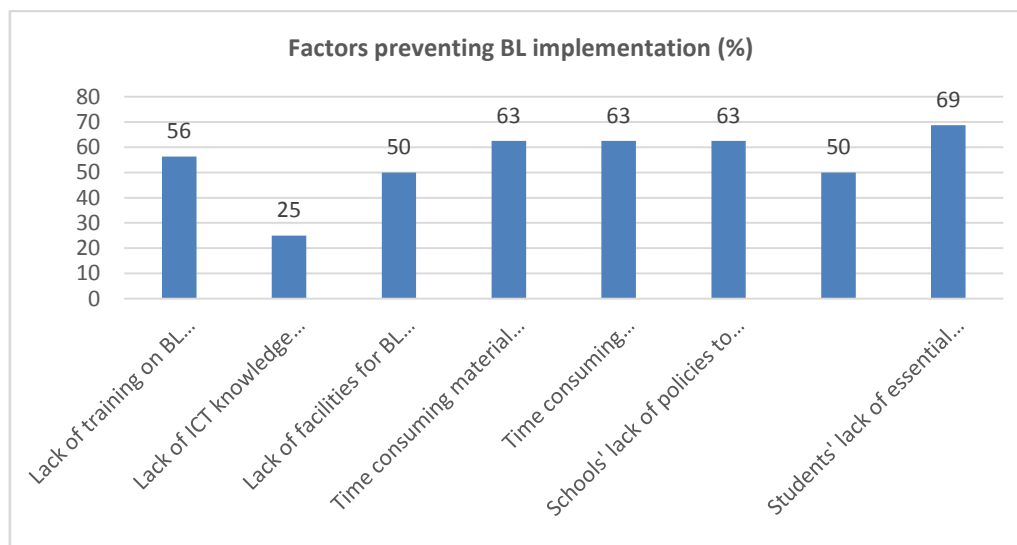
Figure 1: Factors preventing the BL application in the local teaching context

According to 69% of the teachers, the most important factor affecting the feasible application of BL was the students' lack of essential facilities. 63% of participants in the study regarded the burden of materials preparation, system management, which are supposed to be time-consuming, and the lack of motivating policy for BL in schools are significant challenges for them. Other factors, including students' lack of experience with BL approach and teachers' insufficient training, were also recognized as attributes of the challenges of BL. This is similar to the findings by Hoang (2015), who stated that students' lack of experience in using computers and web-based technology was a problem. Interestingly, lack of ICT knowledge and skill was not perceived as a big problem with only 25% of participants considering it a preventing factor. In the interview, teachers confirmed that the lack of facilities was the biggest concern. "The lack of facilities…was among the most serious obstacles" (Teacher C). Besides, the lack of time for the preparation stage and well as for the management of the learning system remains a problem. "The preparation stage takes much time, such as designing the lessons and looking for appropriate materials" (Teacher A).

Though challenges remain, 78% of the participants surveyed believed that using BL in EFL classrooms is necessary and 72% would like to apply BL in their classrooms to "promote English learning…, make the learning more flexible and easier to access" (Teacher B). However, several supports should be provided to facilitate teachers. The figure below summarizes the support that teachers expected to receive so that they can make the most of BL in their classrooms.
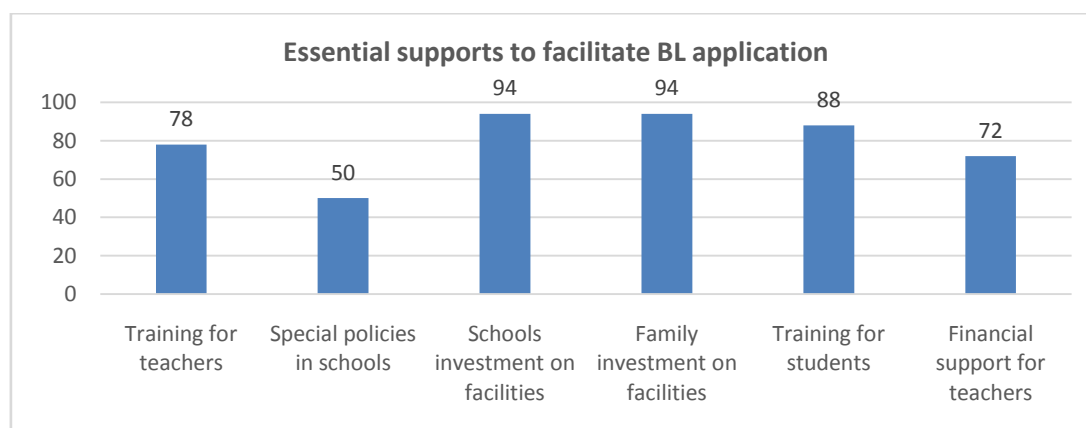
Figure 2: Essential supports to facilitate BL application

Facilities and equipment rank first regarding teachers' expectations for support. 94% of teachers suggested that schools should invest in facilities essential for blended learning. The same percentage agreed that families should also invest in modern technology equipment so that students have sufficient devices to pursue BL at home. Prior training for students regarding the strategies needed to succeed in BL was also considered a significant measure by 88% of the participants. Even though teachers could self-study about BL, 78% of them still prefer to have official training on how to apply BL successfully. Other supports, including financial and professional, as well as special policies to encourage BL, are also crucial for successfully promoting the use of the BL approach in the local teaching context. "Financial support is necessary because in order to run BL, teachers need to invest their time to learn about BL, to prepare materials, and to interact with students on online platforms after class hours" (Teacher B).

IV. Conclusion

The findings of the study have shown that EFL teachers shared positive views about the roles of BL in promoting English language teaching and learning process. BL provides EFL learners with a number of benefits including, but not limited to developing language knowledge and skills, enhancing the English learning process, and improving the English learning environment. BL makes learning more flexible and personalized for students and creates more opportunities for further study and interaction after class hours. For EFL teachers, BL is a good solution for their problems in that it helps them see how well students are engaged in learning by tracking students' self-studying time, providing teachers with a good channel to remain interactive with students after the official class time. Though preventing factors were found, such as insufficient facilities, and lack of time for thorough research and preparation, as well as BL experiences, teachers are willing to apply BL to provide students with a new learning experience, which is potentially more interesting and motivating to them, and to foster the effectiveness of students' learning. To be able to do this, some suggestions were made by teachers such as more investment in facilities and equipment, official training regarding the BL strategies, and motivating policies and professional support should be provided to encourage the implementation of BL in the local EFL settings.

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