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Students' perceptions of a blended learning environment for English training at a university in Vietnam

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Article info.	ABSTRACT
  Keywords 	*Blended learning has become an attractive tendency in education worldwide since the internet develops quickly and attracts a vast number of users. In English language teaching and learning, blended learning offers a lot of promising potential in helping learners to acquire and improve their language competence. The current study was conducted in form of a questionnaire survey at a university in Vietnam to explore students' overall perceptions of blended learning as well as its benefits and challenges. All 165 participants in the current study have experienced learning English in a blended learning environment in two consequential semesters. The findings reveal that more than half of participants had good perceptions about the environment and perceived various benefits as well as challenges of it. However, the study implies that to make blended learning more effective in Vietnam context, more teacher involvement should be implemented.*

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1 INTRODUCTION

The vast development of information technology such as internet speeds up the popularity of online educational programs and has gradually transformed the traditional system of education (Sher, 2009). Higher education institutions worldwide benefit from the emergence of technology since it can enhance the quality of learning. Many universities are applying technology in teaching and learning or transforming themselves to fully electronic universities in the future. Although combining face to face and online learning - blended learning - has a potential to be a popular method of delivering knowledge in the knowledge era, higher learning institutions have only taken on the idea of blended learning as a way to provide learning opportunities for students worldwide in the last decade (Arbaugh, 2014; Rahman *et al.*, 2015). By combining a few delivery

modes of teaching, blended learning has not only provided a variety of options but also been claimed to be more useful to students (Farahiza, 2010).

In teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL), blended learning has been considered as an effective compensation for students' lack of exposure to English language (Hoang, 2015). Blended learning can enable teachers to respond to a wide variety of students' learning needs, to scaffold learning processes, and to facilitate active, reflective and collaborative learning (Rubio and Thoms, 2014). In addition, the integration of online and face-to-face class environments enables teachers to provide students with rich language input and self-paced learning opportunities online and to focus on facilitating students' interactive and collaborative learning in face-to-face classes (Scida and Saury, 2006; Marsh, 2012; Joosten *et al*., 2013).

With its potential to offer an ideal environment for language education (Scida and Saury, 2006; Reinders, 2012), blended learning has been increasingly employed in English language education (Motteram and Sharma, 2009; Grgurovic, 2011; Blake, 2011; Larsen, 2012; Marsh, 2012; Reinders, 2012; Rubio and Thoms, 2014).

In Vietnam, the implementation of blended learning environment (BLE) originates from the fact that the government has identified e-learning as a key factor to drive educational growth. Since 2000, several policies have been issued in an effort to promote the development of e-learning in the country (Anh, 2012). According to the forecast of Ambient Insight (2014), in the period 2013-2018, Vietnam will become one of the top ten countries with the highest self-paced e-learning growth rates in the world as well as in the Asia region. However, the support of government is not the only factor to guarantee the success of e-learning in general and BLE in specific, especially in the EFL field. What is more important is its adoption and acceptance among learners. Porter *et al.* (2014) showed that the attraction of potential adopters, including students, is one of the important phases in blended learning implementation. In Vietnam, only a limited number of studies on e-learning acceptance and BLE (Vu *et al.,* 2011; Huynh and Le Thi, 2014; Nguyen *et al.*, 2014) have been conducted. Consequently, there is a need for further in-depth research on students' perceptions of BLE undertaken in the Vietnam context.

To fill the research gap mentioned above, the current study is aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent does BLE contribute to students' perceived development of English skills and knowledge?

2. What are students' perceptions of BLE as well as the benefits and difficulties of adopting BLE?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of blended learning

Although the term blended learning is widely used in education settings, there is no universally accepted definition of blended learning (Driscoll, 2002; Sharpe *et al.*, 2006; Chew, 2009; Torrisi, 2012; Graham, 2013; Graham *et al.*, 2013; Picciano, 2013). There are various dimensions and aspects of teaching and learning that can be blended or combined together and they sometimes overlap (Chew, 2009). Recently, however, the term blended learning is more commonly used to refer to the combination of online and face-to-face learning and teaching (Bliuc *et al.*, 2007; Graham, 2013; Picciano, 2013).

Blended learning, in this sense, is a distinct phenomenon and highlights the role of web-based technology (Young, 1993; Garrison and Vaughan, 2008; Motteram and Sharma, 2009). In some instances, the proportion of course content delivered online is used to define blended learning. For example, according to Allen *et al.* (2007), blended learning courses and programs are defined as having between 30% to 79% of the course content delivered online. Similarly, Watson *et al.* (2011) set a threshold of 30% of online delivery of content for an environment to be considered blended.

2.2 Students' benefits and challenges of adopting blended learning

Research indicates various benefits of blended learning in EFL contexts. First, with the inclusion of online learning components, blended learning can provide students with rich sources of language learning materials of different types (Neumeier, 2005; Grgurović, 2011; Gruba and Hinkleman, 2012). Access to extensive and current online resources can provide students with various learning opportunities which otherwise are not available to them (Sharpe *et al.*, 2006). Second, blended learning provides students with more opportunities to interact with teachers and other learners (Vaughan, 2007; Chew, 2009; Ocak, 2011; Reinders, 2012; Joosten *et al.*, 2013; Taylor and Newton, 2013; Vaughan *et al.*, 2013; Giang and Minh, 2014). Since students can carry out self-study online, more time in the face-to-face class can be used to facilitate students' interactions with teachers and peers (Pop and Slev, 2012; Reinders, 2012; Al-Ani, 2013). Third, blended learning can facilitate students' active and reflective learning. Research has revealed that students prefer blended learning because it provides them with the flexibility to work from home and at their own pace (Neumeier, 2005; Sharma and Barrett, 2007; Chew, 2009; Moskal and Cavanagh, 2013). As pointed out by Joosten *et al.* (2013), delivering content online provides ample time for students' reflection and enhances their understanding of learning materials since they can reread or replay whenever they want. The inclusion of online learning components allows students to have freedom to choose not only when, but also what and how to study EFL, which can be aligned with their learning conditions and styles. Fourth, blended learning can also improve students' academic outcomes. Different studies (Vaughan, 2007; COHERE, 2011; Riley *et al.*, 2013) reveal that students of blended learning courses perform better at exams, write better papers and have higher quality projects compared to students of purely face-to-face or online courses. In language education, research also shows that

blended learning enhances students' mastery of language knowledge (Scida and Saury, 2006), improves their pronunciation (Al Zumor *et al.*, 2013) and oral language skills (Al-Ani, 2013), and facilitates the development of students' sociolinguistic, intercultural, strategic and pragmatic competence (Vlachos, 2009).

There are two major challenges that students encounter in the implementation of blended learning. First, students lack self-regulated learning skills. The fundamental requirement for the success of blended learning is that students are responsible for and play an active part in learning (Kaleta *et al.*, 2005; Alebaikan, 2010; Launer, 2010). In other words, students are aware of the learning objectives and are motivated to achieve them. They also need to know their individual learning needs in order to choose necessary learning steps, to reflect and evaluate their learning progress and to reorganise the steps if necessary, but not many students are able to carry out the self-regulated learning practices required in a BLE (Launer, 2010). Second, students have difficulties with using technology in blended learning. Research shows that students face with technical problems when studying online such as the requirement for additional software or problems with internet connection and assignment submission systems (Chew, 2009; Grgurović, 2011; Larsen, 2012; Moskal and Cavanagh, 2013). They also find it difficult to make meaning out of materials presented (Oh and Park, 2009), correlate online materials with learning in face-to-face classes or identify critical content or resources online (Chew, 2009; Taylor and Newton, 2013). Some students report a sense of isolation or feeling lost and struggling with technology while undertaking blended learning courses (Reinders, 2012; Moskal and Cavanagh, 2013; Taylor and Newton, 2013).

The student-related challenges can be even more extreme in the context of EFL education in Vietnam where students are familiar with a teacher-controlled learning environment. In such the environment, they are expected to listen and follow teachers' instruction to learn (An, 2002; Danh and Williamson, 2009). Their tendency to depend on teachers for learning motivation and direction can hinder students from making their own decisions on what and how to learn. While the interaction and collaboration with teachers and peers is considered as an important potential of BLE, the facilitation of this benefit in the Vietnamese higher education context is challenged by the power distance between teachers and students, students' respect for group harmony, and face-saving concerns that are characterised by Asian culture (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010).

3 THE STUDY

3.1 Context and participants of the study

The current study was conducted at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. A group of 165 students participated in the survey. These students have followed an English foundation program of 315 hours to enhance their English proficiency level to B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This English level is expected to enable students to attend courses using English as means of instruction (EMI). At the time of the study, they just finished this 315-hour course.

Before the English foundation program, all of the students took an institutional test to examine whether their English level is at A2 level of CEFR or not. Only those who passed this test were admitted to the training program. Within this 315-hour English program, students have 90 hours of listening and speaking, 60 hours of reading, 60 hours of writing, 45 hours of grammar, 30 hours of pronunciation and 30 hours for presentation skills. Except for the presentation skills, all other skills and knowledge of English can be learned in the BLE. This environment is integrated in a commercial textbook for General English being used in the English foundation programs. Similar to other contemporary English textbooks in the market, the book is accompanied with an account where students work online outside the classroom. As stated in the book series, tasks provided in such the learning environment were designed aiming to either consolidate the knowledge that students have already learned in class, give them opportunities to further practice the skills that they have accumulated, or raise their awareness about multi-cultural communication. All tasks accompanied by answers and/or solutions, and teachers go online to check whether students complete the tasks they are assigned to. In the current English foundation program, students are required to complete at least 70% of the tasks in the environment before they took the final test.

3.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed by adapting the questionnaires in the studies by Rahman *et al.* (2015), López-Pérez *et al.* (2011), and Wu *et al.* (2010) which explored students' perceptions of BLE. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. In Section 1, students are asked to choose the best option for the 11 items of five-point Likert scale in which number 1 means "*completely disagree*" and number 5 means *"completely agree"*. The eleven items ask students to evaluate the contribution of the BLE to their development of English skills and

knowledge. Section 2 with 21 items explores students' perceptions of BLE as well as the benefits and difficulties of adopting BLE. This section has a similar scale with Section 1. Section 3 asks for students' demographic information. The questionnaire was piloted with 40 students from the sample population. The reliability test reveals that the questionnaire is reliable to be used with a larger group of the population, with a Cronbach's alpha of .92.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Students' perceived development of English skills and knowledge

Data collected revealed that to some extent BLE is helpful to developing students' English skills and knowledge (Table 1). The eleven items in this section of the questionnaire have been ordered according to the percentages of agreement of the participants. The items which receive the most and third

largest agreement (58.2% and 52.7% respectively) are about the impact of BLE on students' listening skill development. The participants perceived that the listening skills they learned from BLE help them to understand their EMI lessons easily and understand their friends' discussion. The item received the second largest agreement from the student participants is "*The BLE improve my English competence significantly*". However, it is worth noticing that only approximately half of the participants agreed that BLE is helpful to improve their English competence. The next five items that received from about 40% to 50% of student agreement are on the helpfulness of BLE in pronunciation knowledge, reading skills and vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Approximately one third of student participants agreed that their writing and speaking skills were enhanced thanks to BLE.

Table 1: Students' perceived development of English skills and knowledge

Item (N = 165)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
The listening skills learned in BLE help me to understand my EMI lessons easily.	58.2	11.5	30.3
The BLE improve my English competence significantly.	55.8	12.1	32.1
The listening skills learned in BLE help me to understand my friends' discussion.	52.7	16.3	30.9
Pronunciation knowledge learned in BLE helps me figure out what my lecturers and classmates discuss in my EMI classes.	49.1	21.8	29.1
The reading skills learned in BLE help me to read course materials in my major easily.	43	18.2	38.8
Vocabulary learned in BLE helps me understand lessons, do assignments and exchange ideas in EMI courses.	42.8	13.9	33.3
Grammar knowledge learned in BLE helps me write accurately in my EMI assignments.	41.8	21.8	36.4
Grammar knowledge learned in BLE helps me speak accurately when discussing in my EMI classes.	39.4	26	34.5
The writing skills learned in BLE help me to complete writing essays in my EMI classes concisely and smoothly.	34.5	26	39.4
The speaking skills learned in BLE help me to discuss issues related to my majors.	33.3	31.5	35.2
The speaking skills learned in BLE help me to communicate with teachers and classmates in my EMI classes.	30.3	27.9	41.8

Table 1 indicates that approximately one third of the participants ticked the neutral option in the 5-point Likert scale for all 11 items in the questionnaire. Such a finding implies that the BLE implemented in the current study can be difficult to use or not interesting enough to motivate these students to learn. Therefore, these students may have found the BLE was not very effective in helping them to learn English. In addition, since students' online participation was not checked thoroughly and frequently by their teachers, students may have waited until the exam days coming before they started doing the online tasks. This delay may have in turn prevented them

from making progressive learning improvement as expected by the teachers and course designers.

Despite not being appreciated by high percentage of participants, as indicated earlier in the previous section, the current BLE has some benefits that other researchers have revealed. First of all, students agreed that BLE improve their academic outcomes, as stated in studies by Vaughan (2007), COHERE (2011), Riley *et al.* (2013). Secondly, similar to the findings by Scida and Saury (2006), Al-Ani (2013), and Al Zumor *et al.* (2013), more than half of stu-

dents in the current study perceived that BLE enhanced their mastery of language knowledge, improved their pronunciation and oral language skills (see Items 1, 2 and 3 in Table 1).

4.2 Students' overall perception of BLE as well as its benefits and challenges

Regarding students' overall perception of BLE, data collected show that more than half of the participants perceived learning in BLE to be a good idea and felt comfortable with learning in it (Table 2). These proportions are not as high as the researcher has expected since BLE was more positively perceived in the previous studies (e.g. Neumeiner, 2005; Sharpe *et al,* 2006; Chew, 2009; Joosten *et al.,* 2013). Similar to the Section 4.1, about one third of the participants chose the neutral scale for all the eight items of this section, which means that one third of the student participants reveal to be indifferent of this BLE.

Although only 41.2% of the participants agreed that learning in BLE is the thing they like very much, approximately 60 % of the participants disagreed with the reversed items of "*I feel frustrated to learn in BLE in our English foundation program*" and "*I feel learning in BLE is useless to my future career*". This implies that students did not perceived BLE negatively, but they did not perceive them very positively either. As a consequence, only approximately 40% of the participants intended to learn in BLE more frequently and chose courses taught in BLE in the future. This is logical and implies that if teachers and course designers want to receive more appreciation from the students, they should improve the way that they support the students in BLE by either checking students' task completion on a weekly basis, providing them with more feedback on the tasks that most students do not do well, and organizing sections to guide them how to use the BLE more effectively.

Table 2: Students' overall perception of BLE

Item (N = 165)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
Learning in BLE is a good idea.	58.7	10.9	30.3
I feel comfortable with learning in BLE.	52.1	13.3	34.5
Learning in BLE is the thing I like very much.	41.2	21.2	37.6
I feel frustrated to learn in BLE in our English foundation program. (reversed item)	13.4	59.4	27.3
I feel learning in BLE is useless to my future career. (reversed item)	18.8	60.0	21.2
If other courses are taught in BLE, I will participate.	41.2	25.5	33.3
I intend to learn in BLE more frequently in the future.	43.0	20.0	37.0
I intend to choose many courses that are taught in BLE in the coming semesters.	39.4	23.7	37.0

With regards to students' perceptions towards benefits of BLE, the finding is somewhat similar to the sections 1 and 2 (Table 3). In other words, about one third of the participants chose the neutral scale for their answer to all the five items. However, nearly two thirds of the participants agreed that in general BLE is very useful.

Table 3: Students' perceptions of BLE benefits

Item (N = 165)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
In general, I think learning in BLE is very useful.	63	11.5	25.5
Learning in BLE helps me to complete my tasks fasters.	58.8	12.1	29.1
By doing online assignments in BLE, I can easily follow and learn the lessons in the course book.	55.1	14.5	30.3
Learning in BLE helps me to enhance my in-class learning efficiency.	54.5	7.9	37.6
Learning in BLE helps me to reduce the workload in class.	40.0	26.1	33.9

From 54.5% to 58.8% of the participants agreed that BLE helps them to enhance their learning inside the classroom, facilitate their process learning the lessons in the course book, and complete their tasks faster. Only 40% of the participants agreed that BLE helps them to reduce their workload. This implies that these students feel BLE provides them more jobs to do outside the classroom rather than seeing it as an opportunity to do assignments and check the answers immediately without having to check them elsewhere or wait until the teachers give them the answers.

The fact that their overall perceptions of BLE and benefits range around 50% of agreement can be partly explained by their perceived challenges of BLE in Table 4.

Table 4: Students' perceptions of BLE challenges

Item (N = 165)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
In general, it is easy for me to use BLE.	60	14.5	25.5
Learning to learn with the online account in BLE is easy to me.	55.8	23.1	21.2
Learning how to use the tools in BLE is easy to me.	55.2	18.7	26.1
Interactions in BLE is clear and easy to understand.	50.3	16.9	32.7
I can completely control my learning in BLE.	46.1	22.5	31.5
I am easily distracted when learning in BLE.	44.2	30.3	25.5
I feel confident to learn necessary skills to use my online account in BLE.	41.8	22.5	35.8
I can't solve problems related to my online account in BLE.	39.4	20.7	40

Table 4 revealed that 60% of the participants thought that BLE is easy to use. Therefore, it can be implied that the rest of the participants may not make good use of BLE, which in turn, reduces the positive effects of BLE on students' learning. This finding is logical and in accordance with what other researchers (e.g. Chew, 2009; Larsen, 2012; Moskal and Cavanagh, 2013) have found in their studies. In addition, only about half of the participants perceived that the online account, the tools and the interaction in the BLE being used are easy to them. Therefore, less than half of the participants felt they could completely control their learning in BLE and were confident to learn necessary computer skills to use their online account in BLE.

Findings in this part of the study are in vein with previous studies by other researchers (Chew, 2009; Grgurović, 2011; Larsen, 2012; Moskal and Cavanagh, 2013) who found that students face with technical problems when studying online. Therefore, they may have not been able to make meaning out of materials presented (Oh and Park, 2009). It can be inferred that the technological challenges may have prevented students from recognizing the benefits that they have received from the BLE. Therefore, although the participants perceived that BLE is useful for them to improve their English skills and knowledge, the proportions of agreement is not very high, ranging from 50% to 60% only. In this case, orientation sections and help desks should be organized at the beginning and throughout the course to eliminate the challenges that BLE may create.

One more possible reason to explain for such findings may result from the students themselves. Students have long been expected to listen and follow teachers' instruction to learn (An, 2002; Danh and Williamson, 2009), their tendency to depend on teachers for learning motivation and direction can hinder students from making their own decisions on what and how to learn. Therefore, students in the current study may not have done well with their online account because they lack teachers' supervision. Again, this suggests that teachers in BLE should be more active in guiding and supporting students, not just leaving their students struggle in the way they did.

5 CONCLUSION

The current study was designed to examine Vietnamese students' perceptions of BLE after they have experienced working on the environment themselves. The findings of the study revealed that students at a university in Vietnam perceive similar benefits and challenges as those in the studies by other researchers. However, the proportions of agreements to most items in the questionnaire ranged around average level of 50 to 60% only. This can be due to the fact that students were not supervised by their teachers during their process of working on BLE. Therefore, further studies can be done with other groups of students where teachers have more guidance and support over students' learning than the current one. In addition, in-depth interviews should be conducted to reveal students' insights into the effectiveness, benefits and challenges of BLE in Vietnam. Since Vietnam has been ranked as 14th country with the most internet users by Internet World Stat (data retrieved June 20, 2019), BLE in Vietnam contains in itself a lot of potentials for education, especially English language education. Therefore, teachers and course designers themselves should be instructed to use it more efficiently in the future.

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