Blended Learning In Action: Perception Of Teachers And Students On Implementing Blended Learning In Ctu

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Article Info	Abstract
	This study is aimed at investigating the perceptions of the teachers of English in Can Tho University (CTU) on Blended learning (BL). This research brings a practical assessment on the feasibility of this approach at the tertiary level. The study is composed of mixed methods of an online questionnaire and an informal interview. Participants were 136 students and 16 teachers currently working in CTU, one of the oldest and biggest universities in Vietnam. The findings of the study show the teachers' appreciation of the approach and their awareness of its leverage in future teaching practice. However, it is still too early to conclude that this approach will soon replace traditional teaching methods in physical rooms. Therefore, it is recommended that further research on BL should be done to ensure its validity and explore its effectiveness in a Vietnamese context, especially under the impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Traditionally, Can Tho University (CTU) has been considered a regional institution in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta with its important role in providing higher education and transferring technological knowledge to the local territories. To achieve this goal, various efforts from both domestic and international organizations have been made in many aspects, including teaching method training and multi-phase projects.

Despite the fact that BL has evolved for more than two decades, its application in education in Vietnam is not acknowledged until recently due to the dire needs of an alternative for the purpose of preventing the disruption in learning and teaching, leading to a divided attitude of half-expecting and half-believing among the Vietnamese teachers and learners.

Since 2009, CTU has been offering training distance learning courses and have received some modest achievements. However, for English majors distance learning did not start until 2018 when the use of internet-connected technological devices were of great use. Unfortunately, the outbreak of Covid-19 put up a challenge to the traditional face-to-face teaching method and Blended learning (BL) proved to be a potential candidate for this predicament. However, there have not been a large-scale study on how useful or effective BL is in Can Tho University and even in Vietnam in general although this approach has been the subject to research in other nations for quite some time.

Literature Review
1 Definition

Friesen (2012) in his report *Defining Blended Learning* mentioned the origin of BL from EPIC Learning, a computer skill certification and software training in 1999. Since then, this term has been redefined and developed by many researchers and linguists, using various modes of combining education in the classroom and technology support.

Graham (2006) defined Blended learning as a kind of learning whose environments "combine face-to-face instruction with technology-mediated instruction."

Mason and Rennie (2006) extended Graham's definition by modifying "other combinations of technologies, locations or pedagogical approaches"

Staker and Horn (2012) defined BL as *a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home*. They also divided BL into four models: the rotation model, the flex model, the self-blending model and the enriched-virtual model, each with its own characteristics and focus on physical classroom or online instruction.

In Can Tho University, there was not any language course completely done online but the course was usually divided into different sections which were announced to students at the beginning of the course so they could know what section would be in a physical classroom, which would be done online and which would be group work / discussion. Basically, this mode was an example of the rotation model mentioned above.

From the analysis of some above definitions of BL, it may be concluded that although the literature related to BL may be diverse, confusing and sometimes evasive, BL, in its most basic nature, is a combination of traditional face-to-face teaching and computer-mediated support, which has been an effective tool for teaching and learning and is going to be a development trend in education in the future.

2 Benefits of BL

Research on BL from high school to higher education has shown many positive results. Means, Toyama, Murphy, and Baki (2013) did a study on blended learning from middle school to graduate programs. This quite large-scale research compared the effectiveness of BL to that of online learning. The findings showed that students who followed BL program scored better than those who just studied online. What is even more noticeable was that in this study the effectiveness of BL was not affected by the participants' age.

Studies done many researchers such as by Chang et al. (2014), Hall et al. (2015) and Leo & Puzio (2016) also showed students' better involvement and more positive attitudes towards BL. Likewise, Smith and Suzuki (2015) found that 80% of their participants showed that they were more engaged in BL activities.

In higher education, BL also proved to be a good motivator. A study by Stepavona (2020) on using digital learning technology in education experimented mixed forms of learning with Moodle. The results showed that students BL helped develop team work and contributed to enhancing the quality of education and the motivation of students.

3 Issues in implementing BL

Kant (2004) identified three main problems of using BL in university, namely extensive lecture preparation, pressure on students' work, and totally new design of materials for online meetings.

Diaz and Brown (2010) reported three major problems of implementing BL related to faculty , students and institution. The first two problems belonged to human concerns, while the last one technological issues.

Galimova (2019) et al in their study of problems of BL pointed out nine problems of implementing BL which could be categorized into three main groups: the conditions of training, the personality of the teacher, and the personality of the student.

Methodology

1 Research questions

This study was aimed to investigate the perceptions of language teachers on BL; therefore, three questions were raised in this study:

How do CTU teachers and students feel about BL?

How effective is BL when applied in CTU?

What are some concerns when using BL in teaching?

2 Research Methods

This study was a survey usiing an online questionnaire. The questionnaire instrument was designed through Google Doc and sent to the email of invited lecturers and students. The data from the questionnaire and the interview was analyzed, using Microsoft Excel and SPSS.

3 Participants

The participants were students, lecturers and guest lecturers working for CTU in Vietnam. Before the study, an invitation email was sent to them so they could understand the tasks for them and might decline the invitation if they wished. The respondents' identity was kept anonymous. Among 200 invitations, 16 responses were recieved from lecturers and 136 were from students.

4 Instruments

In this research, a two-section questionnaire was used. The first section was composed of 12 items exploring the needs of teachers and students for using BL in the classroom. Each item in this section was designed on a Linkert Scale with five points allowing the individual to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement although some items were exclusively for teachers.

Table 1. Section 1 of questionnaire

Section 1	Lecturers' needs for BL / Students' needs for BL	Subjects	Strongly like (5)	Somewhat like (4)	Neutral (3)	Somewhat dislike (2)	Strongly dislike (1)	Mean Score
1	Better interaction than traditional teaching forms	T (teachers)	7	6	3	0	0	**4.3**
		S (students)	69	52	42	0	0	**4.2**
2	Understanding of the content	T	7	5	2	2	0	4.1
		S	60	81	13	9	0	**4.2**
3	Improved learning results	T	6	6	3	1	0	4.1
		S	56	57	32	18	0	3.9
4	Increased interest in interactive learning activities	T	5	6	4	1	0	3.9
		S	64	36	39	12	12	3.8
5	Students' feedback in	T	8	3	2	2	1	3.9

No	Item							Mean
	learning activities	S	44	34	64	10	11	3.6
6	Time management in using BL	T	2	5	3	4	2	3.1
		S	66	61	17	19	0	4.1
7	Students' participation in activities	T	7	5	1	2	1	3.9
		S	71	31	13	17	31	3.6
8	Softwares supporting BL	T	4	3	3	4	2	3.2
9	Evaluation in lessons designed with BL	T	0	1	3	6	6	**1.9**
		S	21	34	77	19	12	**3.2**
10	Support in lesson designing workshops	T	0	5	6	5	0	3
11	Facilities supporting lessons using BL	T	7	5	4	0	0	4.2
		S	53	35	41	34	0	3.7
12	Support from the government policies towards BL	T	2	2	6	4	2	2.9
		S	30	22	111	0	0	3.5

The other section was 5 items concerning the applicability of BL. These items were in the form of Yes-No questions and aimed for both teachers and students.

Table 2. Section 2 of questionnaire

Section 2	Applicability of BL	Subject	Yes	No
13	Should Bl be applied more in study programs of CTU?	T	93.8%	6.2%
		S	**85.9%**	14.1%
14	Should BL be applied in more than 50% of the learning courses?	T	75%	25%
		S	71.8%	28.2%
15	Is BL applicable for theory courses?	T	75%	25%
		S	69.9%	30.1%
16	Is BL applicable for practice courses?	T	31.3%	**68.7%**
		S	64.4%	**35.6%**
17	Is BL suitable in the time of Covid-19 pandemic?	T	**100%**	0%
		S	72.4%	27.6%

Data Analysis

After collected, the survey data was analyzed and responses were put in percentage combined with SPSS calculation of oneway anova and standard deviation for its reliability.

5. Findings

To investigate the effectiveness of the teaching model using BL in CTU, the researchers measured the Mean score of responses for the first section in the questionnaire. The results showed that most responses from lecturers were positive with the Mean score of 4.3 for item 1 (Better interaction). Students also showed their similar interest with 4.2 in item 1 and item 2 (Understanding of the content). The lowest score in the survey for both teachers and students belonged to item 9 (Evaluation in lessons designed with BL), 1.9 and 3.2 respectively.

Item 3 in the questionnaire showed the Mean score of 4.1 from teachers. Similarly, the Mean score from students was 3.9.

The other items in this section showed the Mean score ranging from 2.9 to 4.1 suggesting that BL seemed to be effective. However, it should be noticed that the interaction was not high (M=3.6), while BL offered its

attraction to the audiences. Another issue was there seemed to be a lack of support from administrative policies.

An additional issue was time management in item 6. This problem seemed to weigh on teachers (M=3.1) since they have to prepare their lesson in a new design, causing them to spend more time and effort at work. Students, on the other hand, did not have to endure this process, so their Mean score was 4.1.

Various items concerning support for BL such as softwares (item 8), training workshops (item 10) and facilities (item 11) showed different expectation and condition. While CTU seemed to provide a good system of facilities for implementing BL (M=4.2), there was clearly not enough guidance in using softwares (M=3.2) and a lack of training in form of workshops (M=3.0)

The result from the second section of the questionnaire involving the applicability of BL in teaching proved to be positive. All lecturers thought it was suitable to use BL in the time of a pandemic, while it was considered not suitable for practice courses (68.7%). The response from students was not different with their disagreement of 35.6%. In general, most lecturers hoped for more application of BL in teaching (93.8%). Students shared the same view with 85.9%.

Discussion

The study findings showed to be positive, suggesting that using BL in education could be a direction to development in Vietnam. Furthermore, they provided answers to the research questions on BL, which proved the benefits of BL in its applicability, interest and interrelationship of involved components in the process of organizing BL. One important finding from this study is that there was a strong agreement on the potential of applying BL in teaching from both lecturers and students. This leads to a challenge of how to set the criteria on designing lessons for BL. Another issue is the assistance of the topdown administration to spread this application in various study programs in CTU. With the clearly-set criteria, there will be a uniform design which in turn will limit inharmonious individual variations. Furthermore, the quality of BL lesson design will become more interactive and have better quality.

In order to make BL more effective, the attitude of both teachers and students are extremely important. This awareness is needed for designing a lesson with many interactive activities. On the contrary, without the cooperation of students, the lesson is easy to become a monologue of lecturers, causing boredom and a lack of motivation to design lessons. Therefore, it is significant for teachers to invest both time and effort in designing their lessons attracting the attention of students. Teachers also need a positive attitude to listen to students' feedback for adjustment and improvement.

Conclusion

Due to the time and scope of this study, further study on BL in CTU context should be done to obtain better evaluation of implementing BL. Research on BL should also be done in other universities in Vietnam in order that a clearer vision on BL could provide better help in implementation.

BL is not a new approach but it has been applied recently in Vietnam. Despite some contrasting views, it is undeniable to recognize the contribution of BL to providing a vivid lesson. Perhaps its strongest point is its capability of providing a better understanding of the lesson and quicker feedback from students.

It may be concluded that this approach should be encouraged and practiced among Vietnamese universities involving the participation of universities, stakeholders and educational policies.

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