



Enhancing English Language Learning In Tertiary Education Through Blended Approaches: A Bangladesh Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: Main purpose of this study to investigate the implications of adopting blended approaches in enhancing English language proficiency, bridging the digital divide, and preparing students for the demands of a globalized world. Through a Bangladesh perspective, this research seeks to illuminate the transformative power of blended learning.

Methodology: This research employs a qualitative approach. In depth Interviews (IDI) and FGDs has been administered to thirty facilitators and thirty students to measure benefits and challenges associated with blended learning. Additionally, Interviews with ten pedagogy experts has provide insights into successful implementation strategies. Data has been analyzed thematically.

Main Findings: Research findings show that by blending technology with traditional pedagogy, this approach prepares students for a world where adaptability and digital literacy are paramount. The success of this approach relies on the collaborative efforts of educational institutions, instructors, and students, all working towards a holistic and dynamic learning experience that empowers students to thrive in an interconnected global society.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study adds additional knowledge of the challenges and efforts associated with blended approaches to English language learning in tertiary education in Bangladesh. The study's findings can be used as a guide for interested parties, including educators and institutions of higher learning, to address the issues with English language teaching and learning in tertiary education and improve student language learning quality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency is a vital skill in Bangladesh's globalized academic and professional landscape. The need for effective language education led to the exploration of pedagogical approaches that align with the demands of modern learners. Blended learning, by merging traditional teaching with digital tools, presents a dynamic solution to elevate English language education in the tertiary level. Blending the best of in-person instruction with the flexibility and reach of online resources, this approach offers a multifaceted learning experience that aligns with the needs of modern learners. The landscape of education is rapidly evolving, driven by technological advancements and the need for flexible learning solutions. In this context, the blended approach to teaching and learning has emerged as a transformative pedagogical strategy. In Bangladesh, where English

proficiency plays a pivotal role in both academia and the job market, integrating a blended approach into tertiary English education holds immense promise.

In the context of Bangladesh, the study is especially important for addressing the urgent demand for efficient language instruction in the postsecondary sector. It is imperative to improve English language learning because it is still the world's primary language and a necessary ability for success in both academia and the workplace. In order to develop a more immersive and flexible English language learning environment in postsecondary education settings, this project aims to explore and suggest novel blended approaches that combine technology-mediated learning with conventional classroom methods. In addition to boosting language proficiency, this study intends to advance students' critical thinking, communication skills, and general academic and professional competence within the unique cultural and educational setting of Bangladesh.

The concept of blended learning has evolved in response to the digital revolution, offering a solution to the limitations of traditional classroom teaching. The conceptualized the Community of Inquiry framework, highlighting the importance of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence in online learning environments. This framework provides a theoretical foundation for the effective integration of online and in-person components in tertiary education [1]. Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of blended learning in enhancing English language education. A study found that The combination of face-to-face and online interactions in blended learning fosters student engagement and encourages active participation [2].

Strategies to address these challenges include establishing on-campus resources and conducting training workshops for educators. According to a study, by utilizing the blended learning tools, HEIs in Bangladesh can achieve radical improvements in education quality as well as in the accessibility and cost-effectiveness of learning programs [3]. According to another study, the blended learning approach used in teaching English as a Foreign Language in China was found to be effective in improving students' listening and speaking skills, while also promoting teacher and student initiative and enhancing learner autonomy [4]. Results indicated according a recent study, significant improvements in every area of language teaching, supplying valuable evidence that the adoption of a blended approach in learning English for Specific Purposes in higher education can appreciably enhance students' results and experience by providing a more student-centered learning environment [5]. A novel English teaching model based on Blended Learning, which combines face-to-face and online learning, was proposed and found to be effective in assisting students in mastering courses, according to the results of a case study [6]. According to another study, blended learning enhances student's learning experience and learning outcomes [7].

Another study stated that, blended learning was used to teach English for Academic Purposes to Malaysian undergraduates, and the students viewed this approach favorably despite slow internet connectivity being a problem [8]. Another study revealed that a blended learning concept for a university teacher training course for prospective teachers of English, which combines contact learning and interactive e-learning using different methods and activities, various traditional and electronic media, and task-based learning modules that begin with multimedia-based case stories, and is highly appreciated by learners [9].

Blended Learning (BL) approach is one of the most prevalent methods for incorporating Information and Communications Technology into the educational process. In its simplest definition, blended learning (BL) seeks to combine face-to-face and online settings, resulting in improved learning engagement and flexible learning experiences, with settings that go well beyond the use of a simple online content repository to support face-to-face classes [10]. Blended learning can be a valuable tool for enhancing English language learning in Bangladesh's tertiary education, as it can help students overcome some of the obstacles they meet.

Since 2000, researchers have focused on investigating various BL perspectives [1]. In spite of the global COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, this trend has been strongly prompted. Despite the fact that nearly two decades of research have been conducted on BL, there are still several challenges and unanswered questions, one of which is the investigation of different BL models with specific application domains to test their effects on students' psychological and behavioral outcomes [10]. Moreover, a study found integrated teaching methods must be tailored to the requirements of various courses [11]. On the basis of the above findings coined, it is necessary to conduct research on the design and investigation of BL models in particular courses. Researchers have increased their focus on blended learning in English courses as they search for methods to implement this instructional model in English Teaching and Learning (ETL) [12]. Numerous review articles have examined the outcomes and effects of utilizing BL in ETL. The effective use of BL develops language skills, improves the English learning environment, and motivates students to study English. Blended learning has a positive impact on each of the integrated skills of the English language [13]. A recent literature review highlighted four trends in BL strategies: collaborative-based instruction, learning management systems, social media applications, and technology-based instruction [14].

Numerous studies have demonstrated that integrated learning can be utilised effectively to improve language skills in language learners. Blended learning enables the development of learners' speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, as opposed to traditional face-to-face or completely online approaches [15]-[17]. The use of blended learning with language learners has a direct effect on enhancing their reading abilities. The researchers also concluded, based on the findings of the study, that blended learning facilitates the learning process

and can be effectively implemented in English reading classes [16]. A study conducted a comparative study between integrated learning and traditional face-to-face learning. Specifically, the study compared the efficacy of integrated learning to traditional methods used in China to teach English as a second language. The research sample consisted of 5,376 students enrolled in ESL courses at a major university in Beijing. The researchers analyzed a large database containing information on ESL students' performance, gender, grade, and disciplinary standing. In comparison to students who were taught in a face-to-face setting, blended learning students demonstrated higher academic achievement in ESL classes. In other terms, blended learning students performed better in ESL courses than traditional learning students. According to the researcher, the results demonstrated that integrated learning has a positive effect on student learning outcomes [18].

A study investigated the attitudes of EFL students towards blended learning in another study. The sample for the investigation included 162 English language learners. Utilizing a questionnaire, the researchers examined the perceptions and attitudes of EFL students regarding blended learning as compared to traditional classroom instruction. The results of the study indicated that the majority of EFL students prefer blended learning over the traditional approach to teaching English because it increases their motivation to learn, thereby enhancing the learning process. They believed that integrated learning has a direct effect on their learning. However, according to the participants, they prefer traditional testing methods over digital methods [19]. According to the findings of a research the participants also believed that integrated learning improved their English proficiency levels. As a result, the researchers conclude that integrated learning is an effective mode of instruction that can be used to enhance the EFL teaching and learning process [19].

The continuation of antiquated practices in language instruction at the university level posed obstacles and difficulties in encouraging students' autonomy [20]. Similarly, a study states that assessment and evaluation are "integral components" of English language instruction in Bangladeshi universities. However, the study reveals contradictory findings regarding English language testing. Students complained that they did not consistently receive feedback from their instructors, while many teachers stated that they did provide feedback. This study also reveals that assessment in English foundation courses at public universities has been confined to a specific structure [21]. According to a second study which found essential pedagogical initiative feedback in English language classrooms is not regular [22].

A findings of a study ensured that the English departments of all Bangladeshi public and private universities are serving the intended purpose. In recent years, however, the teaching pedagogy of these departments has been persistently impacted by alterations in the country's social and academic landscapes. The English departments of our nation's universities would be well-advised to take the necessary steps to resolve the issues faced by students [23]. Again, identified four main issues with the English language teaching practices of the English departments at Bangladeshi universities. These are: (1) the lack of linguistic competence of students; (2) the inadequacy of curricula; (3) the inadequacy of teaching methodology; and (4) the absence of teacher training and research activities. On the other hand, the majority of university students who enroll in English departments are found to have inadequate language skills [23]. Therefore, they cannot handle the subject burden [24].

In conclusion, Blended learning is a promising strategy for improving English language acquisition in higher education. It can offer students the chance to practice English in a variety of contexts and help them develop their independent learning skills. Blended learning is still in its infancy in Bangladesh, but it is an approach that merits further investigation.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach. In depth Interviews (IDI) and FGDs has been administered to thirty facilitators and thirty students to measure benefits and challenges associated with blended learning. Additionally, Interviews with ten pedagogy experts has provide insights into successful implementation strategies. Data has been analyzed thematically. The subjects, concepts, and patterns of meaning that recur often are called common themes. The researchers in this study carefully study the data to find these themes. Thematic analysis method in this study involves six steps: familiarization, coding, generating themes, evaluating themes, defining and labeling themes, and writing up. By using this procedure, the researchers have prevented confirmation bias from creeping into the analysis of this study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

Subtheme-1: Benefits of Blended learning

Customized Learning: The blended approach allows instructors to tailor content to students' needs, catering to various proficiency levels and learning styles. Blended learning is a natural fit for customized learning because it

allows for a mix of traditional face-to-face instruction and online learning. This gives learners the flexibility to learn in the way that works best for them, whether that is in a classroom, at home, or on the go.

One of the respondents replied, “*Customized learning gives learners the freedom to focus on the topics that they are most interested in and to learn in a way that works best for them and this can be done by using tools such as learning management systems (LMS) and adaptive learning platforms.*”

Flexibility: As many tertiary students in Bangladesh juggle multiple commitments, the flexibility of online resources enables learning at their own pace, removing the barriers of time and location.

One of the respondents said, “Allowing the learners to choose their own learning materials and activities, providing opportunities for self-paced learning, offering a variety of assessments flexibility in blended learning can be provided.”

Enhanced Engagement: Integrating multimedia elements, online discussions, and interactive activities captures students' attention, fostering active engagement and deeper understanding.

One of the facilitators responded, “Active learning strategies involve students in the learning process, such as through group work, problem-solving, and simulations and these strategies can help to keep students engaged and motivated.”

Other facilitators added, “Personalized learning can be done by using a variety of teaching methods and technologies, and by providing students with opportunities to choose their own learning path.”

One of the facilitators replied, “A supportive learning environment is one where students feel comfortable taking risks and participating in the learning process and can be created by establishing clear expectations, providing positive reinforcement, and addressing any challenges that students may face.”

Real-World Language Use: Online platforms facilitate exposure to authentic English language usage, helping students develop practical language skills for the global communication landscape.

One of the respondents said, “By giving students the opportunity to communicate with native speakers and can be done by video conferencing, online chat, email. Communicating with native speakers can help students to practice their language skills and to learn about different cultures.”

Another respondent retorted, “Having students complete projects that require them to use language in real-world contexts and could involve writing a blog post, creating a presentation, or developing a website. Completing projects that require students to use language in real-world contexts can help them to see the relevance of language learning and to apply their skills.”

Digital Literacy: Embracing technology fosters digital literacy among students, an essential skill in the modern job market.

One of the participants added, “Digital literacy could involve identifying reliable sources, evaluating the accuracy of information, and distinguishing between fact and opinion.”

Another responded replied, “Digital tools, such as Google Docs and Slack, can be used to facilitate collaboration between students.”

Some of the respondents responded, “Digital tools, such as coding platforms and data visualization tools, can be used to solve problems; graphic design software and video editing software, can be used to create new content; email and video conferencing, can be used to communicate with students and teachers.”

Subtheme-2: Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Mitigating Digital Divide: While internet accessibility remains uneven, institutions can offer on-campus resources and support to bridge the gap.

Respondents replied in one of the FGDs, “In blended learning, the digital divide can be a challenge, as it can create inequities between students who have access to technology and those who do not. This can be especially problematic for students from low-income families or rural areas, who may be less likely to have access to technology at home.”

In another FGD respondents added, “ By Providing students with access to computers and the internet through school-provided devices, public libraries, or community centers, providing training and support for students who are not familiar with technology, developing blended learning materials that are accessible to all students, collaborating with community partners to provide access to technology for students who need it, partnering with other educators and organizations we can mitigate the digital divide in blended learning.”

Faculty Training: Educators may require training to navigate the technology and design effective online materials. Workshops and resources can empower instructors with the necessary skills.

One of the respondents added, "Face-to-face workshops can provide teachers with the opportunity to learn about blended learning from experts."

Again, some respondents also responded, "Online courses can provide teachers with the opportunity to learn about blended learning at their own pace."

Some respondents replied, "The faculty training should be evaluated by other faculties to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the teachers."

Maintaining Interaction: To prevent isolation, scheduled in-person sessions, live webinars, and discussion boards can ensure consistent interaction and collaborative learning.

Some of the respondents responded, "Creating a positive learning environment is a must for maintaining interaction in blended learning. This includes being welcoming and supportive of all students."

A few of the respondents added, "By using games, simulations and other activities the interaction in blended learning can be enhanced."

Quality Control: Institutions must ensure the quality and relevance of online materials, constantly updating them to reflect evolving language trends and requirements.

Some of the students replied, "Rubrics can be used to assess student work and to ensure that grading is consistent."

Some of the students added, "Learning materials should be reviewed regularly to ensure that they are up-to-date and relevant."

Assessment and Evaluation: Implementing fair and effective assessment methods, such as online quizzes and peer evaluations, maintains academic integrity and measures progress accurately.

According to some of the students, "Blended learning typically involves a combination of face-to-face and online instruction, which means that assessments need to be designed to be effective in both formats and this can be difficult, as different assessment methods have different strengths and weaknesses."

Some of the respondents added, "By using a variety of assessment methods, tracking students' progress, providing timely feedback the challenges of blended learning can be mitigated."

Subtheme-3: Successful Implementation Strategies

Comprehensive Planning: Institutions should design a clear roadmap for integrating blended learning into the curriculum, outlining learning objectives, assessment methods, and resource selection. Comprehensive planning in blended learning is the process of carefully considering all aspects of a blended learning program, from the learning objectives to the technology to be used. This ensures that the program is well-designed and effective.

One of the respondents shared his views like, "If we involve stakeholders in the planning process including learners, facilitators, administrators and other staff members comprehensive planning will be effective then."

Another respondent added, "By identifying the learning objectives, choosing the right blend of face-to-face and online learning, selecting the right learning materials and activities, providing regular feedback and support, using variety of resources, getting feedback from the learners we can plan the blended learning in tertiary education more effective."

Student Orientation: Providing students with orientation sessions on using online platforms and resources can mitigate initial challenges.

One of the respondents responded, "Online orientation of the students can be done through a website or learning management system (LMS) and it should provide students with information about the blended learning program, including the learning objectives, the technology that will be used, and the expectations for student participation."

Another responded added, "Blended orientation can be a combination of online and face-to-face activities and can be a good way to provide students with the information they need in a way that is most convenient for them."

Inclusive Design: Creating accessible online content ensures that students with varying abilities can benefit equally.

One of the respondents thought, "Online discussion forums can be a great way for students to collaborate and share ideas, regardless of their location or disability."

Another respondent responded, "Video conferencing can be used to provide students with one-on-one or small-group instruction, or to facilitate group discussions."

Continuous Evaluation: Regularly soliciting feedback from students and instructors allows for the refinement of the blended approach, addressing concerns promptly.

One of the respondents added, "Continuous assessment in blended learning can help teachers to track student progress and identify any areas where they need additional support."

Another respondent said, “There are different ways to conduct continuous assessments in blended learning; like-quiz, discussions, portfolios, peer assessment and self-assessment.”

Collaboration and Sharing: Educators should collaborate across institutions to share best practices, resources, and innovative strategies for effective blended learning. By working together, learners can share their knowledge and ideas, learn from each other, and solve problems more effectively.

One of the respondents shared, “VLE platforms can be used to facilitate collaboration and sharing in a variety of ways. For example, they can be used to create discussion forums, wikis, and live chat rooms.”

Another respondent added, “Learners can use live chat to communicate with each other in real time. This can be a great way to ask questions and get help from peers.”

According to another respondent, “Learners who collaborate and share are more likely to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This is because they are able to discuss and debate ideas, and to come up with solutions to problems together.”

3.2 Discussion

The current research's specific aim is to analyze the Enhancing English Language Learning in Tertiary Education through Blended Approaches. The study found that Blended learning is a natural fit for customized learning as other study also stated capacity uses learning analytics and big data to improve practices. These methods may help students create personalized learning paths in solo or group activities. These activities may include class lectures [25].

It is evident from the current study that the flexibility of online resources enables learning at their own pace. Students like blended learning's scheduling flexibility, online interactivity, and teacher availability, according to some research [26]. This study proposes that blended learning blends onsite and online learning by combining their strengths and neutralizing their faults to give students, instructors, and schools flexibility. Time, space, travel, and pace can be flexible with sequential or parallel designs [27]. And Asynchronous communication allows for space and time flexibility for student reflection, which may deepen comprehension [28].

This study indicates that Blended learning enhanced engagement in learning. A Research showed a test group (where blended learning was used) had higher learning outcomes and engagement with online and in-class activities. This was shown in their online quiz scores, forum, conversation, and glossary time and quality [29]. Test group students felt motivated since they had some control over learning time, place, and pace. The evidence shows that blended learning promotes student achievement and engagement [29]. Another study found many benefits to blended learning course redesign. This technique integrates face-to-face and online learning activities into a course, increasing student engagement, time flexibility, and student-faculty interaction [30].

Another study found that social work educators can use blended learning to improve student involvement while acknowledging BL support inequities. Blended learning improves student participation in and out of class, fostering critical thinking and reflection [31]. Therefore, the benefits of blended activities in class should be important to students and impact their topic engagement. There is minimal direct research on learner engagement and mixed learning [32].

This research found students develop practical language skills for the global communication landscape. Technology has transformed social interaction. Technology has helped create and implement new educational environments and delivery techniques, such as distant and blended learning. While such approaches have become more popular, little is known about the learning abilities that enhance academic performance, making it difficult for teachers and administrators to apply effective methods to cultivate these skills [33].

Embracing technology fosters digital literacy among students which is found by this study. Effective learning was compared to four digital literacy constructs: underpinnings, background knowledge, central skills, and attitudes and perspectives. Partial least squares were used to examine responses from local university students taking blended learning courses. Analysts found that the four digital literacy characteristics could be reduced to three, and each had a statistically significant link with effective learning. This study shows that students need digital literacy to succeed in blended learning [34]. Digital literacy significantly impacts academic performance, as students' increased engagement with online learning environments enhances their performance in specific assessment tasks [35].

This research reviles digital divide in blended approach. These findings support several prior studies as Network coverage and device type significantly impact university education accessibility, particularly for marginalized students. Addressing digital inequalities and promoting inclusive pedagogy is crucial for addressing these challenges [36].

Our findings also reveal that educators may require training to navigate the technology: and design effective online materials. An action research study and the challenges of implementing a new teaching technique are reviewed, along with ways to motivate and assist staff with limited budget, training, and support [37]. As well as the transition to a blended learning university environment in Saudi Arabia is an urgent solution, recommended through thorough orientation, computer labs, instructor training programs, and curriculum design ideas, with regular feedback for accurate action plans [38].

According to what we discovered, preventing feelings of isolation can be accomplished through regularly planned in-person meetings, live webinars, and online discussion boards, all of which can provide consistent interaction and promote collaborative learning. According to the findings of one aspect of a study, the interaction-driven approach ought to be the primary focus of future work on the development and application of Blended learning in English as Foreign Language settings [39].

According to our findings, institutions are responsible for ensuring the quality and relevance of all materials found online. The results reveal a positive perception of blended learning among students, with online discussions being particularly beneficial for social interaction, indicating an understanding of factors enhancing blended learning experiences in project-based digital ecosystems [40].

According to our analysis maintaining academic integrity and correctly measuring progress requires using assessment methods that are both fair and effective. Some examples of such methods are online quizzes and peer assessments. According to the findings of a study, the instructor who used blended learning delivered training more effectively and utilized more efficient ways of evaluation than the instructor who used face-to-face instruction. This is backed by differences in the performances of students, which reveal that the experimental group fared better by scoring higher means and recording lower variances. This is reinforced by the fact that the experimental group performed better than the control group [41]. Higher education emphasizes student interaction and blended learning. This article shows how collaborative learning applications and a blended approach to learning can be used to design and support assessment activities that increase student engagement with course concepts, peers, faculty, and external experts, improving student success and satisfaction [42].

Our analysis shows schools should outline learning objectives, assessment techniques, and resource choices for blended learning. Comprehensive blended learning planning involves considering all components of a programme, from learning objectives to technology. Teachers are responsible for planning virtual learning environments that enhance students' learning experience, complementing face-to-face classes and preparing them for blended courses, thereby empowering learners [43].

It is evident from our study that the implementation of accessible online content is crucial in order to enable equitable access and fair opportunities for students with diverse abilities. Despite all efforts, most societies and education systems have failed in both elements of the first principle. In this context, technology is promoted as an effective mechanism for reducing inequality in education [44]. A study identified three ways in which people see technology as a facilitator of inclusion and equality in education: 1) increasing the diversity of mechanisms and modes in education; 2) decreasing barriers to education as a democratization mechanism; and 3) enhancing individual control over one's own education in terms of content, delivery mode, and pace of learning [44].

According to our analysis the consistent practice of actively seeking input from both students and teachers enables the iterative improvement of the blended method, facilitating the timely resolution of any difficulties that may arise. Learning analytics can be defined as the systematic process of gathering, assessing, interpreting, and presenting data pertaining to learners and their specific learning conditions. The primary objective of learning analytics is to gain insights and enhance the learning experience and the learning settings in which it takes place. These technologies and capabilities have the potential to enhance assessment and feedback procedures, as well as serve as the foundation for customization through the utilization of automated tutoring systems [45]. First, flexible and individualized student support in and out of huge classes. Technology in this dimension can scale an instructor's ability to meet students' academic needs, improving learning. Second, enabling instructors and institutions to create, bundle, unbundle, and deploy digital content across platforms for content access and sharing [46].

4. CONCLUSION

The integration of a blended approach to English language education in Bangladesh's tertiary level holds immense potential. By capitalizing on the advantages of both in-person instruction and online resources, institutions can cultivate a dynamic learning environment that empowers students to develop practical language skills, digital literacy, and critical thinking abilities. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, this approach ensures that Bangladesh's graduates are equipped to excel on the global stage, both academically and professionally. As Bangladesh strides towards educational modernization, a blended approach to English language education at the tertiary level emerges as a beacon of innovation and efficiency. By blending technology with traditional pedagogy, this approach prepares students for a world where adaptability and digital literacy are paramount. The success of this approach relies on the collaborative efforts of educational institutions, instructors, and students, all working towards a holistic and dynamic learning experience that empowers students to thrive in an interconnected global society.

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