

Enhancing English Language Learning in Tertiary Education through Blended Approaches: A Bangladesh Perspective

Md. Fajlay Rabbi¹, Md. Sefatul Islam², Md. Jamil Hossain³
Education Discipline, Khulna University, Bangladesh^{1,2}
Govt. Teachers' Training College, Mymensingh, Bangladesh³
Email: ranjanrabbi@edu.ku.ac.bd¹

Abstract. The modern educational landscape is witnessing a paradigm shift with the integration of technology into traditional teaching methods. Blended learning, a pedagogical approach combining face-to-face instruction with online resources, holds the potential to revolutionize English language learning in Bangladesh's tertiary education system. This paper explores the significance, benefits, challenges, and strategies of employing blended learning within the context of English language education in Bangladesh. By harnessing the advantages of both in-person and online components, blended learning offers flexible access, heightened engagement, and personalized learning experiences. This study investigates 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 in shaping the future of English language education in tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Blended learning, English language education, tertiary education, Bangladesh, digital literacy, student engagement, implementation strategies.

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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.

The concept of blended learning has evolved in response to the digital revolution, offering a solution to the limitations of traditional classroom teaching. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) 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. Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of blended learning in enhancing English language education. Lim and Morris (2009) found that the combination of face-to-face and online interactions in blended learning fosters student engagement and encourages active participation. Additionally, it allows for personalized learning experiences, catering to diverse learning styles and paces (Lai & Bower, 2019). The flexibility offered by blended learning is particularly relevant in a country like Bangladesh, where students often balance multiple commitments (Chowdhury & Rahman, 2018).

While the advantages of blended learning are evident, challenges persist in its effective implementation. The digital divide, characterized by unequal access to technology, remains a concern, particularly in developing countries like Bangladesh (Akther & Rahman, 2020). Faculty training in utilizing technology for teaching is another critical factor (Khine & Lourdasamy, 2018). 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 (Chowdhury, 2019).

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 (Cui, 2014). Results indicated according to Šafranji (2013), 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. The blended learning using DynEd in English Course contributes

significantly to the academic achievement of students compared to the traditional method but there is no contribution significantly to the students' attitudes towards English course (Inal & Korkmaz, 2019). 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 (Wang, X. et al., 2009). Blended learning is effective in English courses as demonstrated by figures analyzing students' learning in seven courses at the University of Hradec Kralove, as described and analyzed in a case study by Klimova et al. (2017).

According to another study, blended learning enhances student's learning experience and learning outcomes (Wai & Seng, 2013). According to research, the implication of this study is that blended learning is suitable to be implemented in secondary school English classes as long as there are sufficient monetary, equipment and technical supports (Wong et al., 2018). 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 (Thang et al., 2013). 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.

Significance and Rationale

Bangladesh's higher education institutions recognize the importance of English proficiency for academic and career success. Blended learning addresses the diverse learning needs of students, providing them with flexible access to learning materials and opportunities for interactive engagement. In a country where both urban and rural students aspire to improve their language skills, blended approaches can bridge geographical gaps and offer equal learning opportunities.

The Blended Learning Paradigm

Blended learning, often referred to as hybrid learning, amalgamates face-to-face classroom interactions with digital learning tools and resources. In the context of tertiary English education in Bangladesh, this involves integrating traditional teaching methods with online platforms, creating a harmonious blend of interactive engagement and self-paced learning. Blended learning combines the best of traditional face-to-face instruction with the flexibility and accessibility of online resources. In the context of English language education in Bangladesh's tertiary institutions, this approach entails merging interactive classroom sessions with digital resources, creating an enriched learning experience.

Literature Review

English is the international language of communication and is increasingly used as the medium of instruction in Bangladesh's higher education institutions. Due to a lack of exposure to the language outside of the classroom and limited access to quality English language instruction, however, many students in Bangladesh face difficulties in acquiring English. 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 as Ashraf et. al (2021) comprehended. 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 (Garrison & Kanuka (2004). 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 as Ashraf et. al (2021) evaluated. Moreover, Xie & Tsai (2021) found integrated teaching methods must be tailored to the requirements of various courses. On the basis of the above findings, Albiladi & Alshareef (2019) 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). according to Hashemi & Na (2020) 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. A recent literature review highlighted four trends in BL strategies: collaborative-based instruction, learning management systems, social media applications, and technology-based instruction as Ramalingam et. al (2022) analyzed.

Numerous studies (Adas & Bakir, 2013; Grgurovic, 2011; Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017; Shih, 2010) 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. According to Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017), 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. Zhang and Zhu (2018) 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.

Akbarov, Gonen, and Aydoan (2018) 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. According to the findings of Akbarov et al. (2018), 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.

Again, the practice of learner autonomy in universities has become a revolutionary paradigm in the field of modern language instruction (Hossain & Mustapha, 2020). The continuation of antiquated practices in language instruction at the university level posed obstacles and difficulties in encouraging students' autonomy (Gach, 2020). Similarly, Hasan (2020) 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. According to a second study by Rahman et al. (2011), essential pedagogical initiative feedback in English language classrooms is not regular. Kabir (2011) cited negative washback effects of tests as evidence that negative washback and stresses have an impact on the learning of university students.

Amin (2019) 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. Again, Amin (2019) 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. Therefore, they cannot handle the subject burden (Islam et al., 2021).

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.

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.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Benefits of Blended Learning in Bangladesh's Tertiary English Education

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.”*

2. Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

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.”*

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 respondent 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.”*

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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