

Blended Learning in the Context of EFL: Curriculum Design and Implementation

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ABSTRACT

This study proposed a curriculum design that thoroughly considers blended learning in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL). The main objectives were (1) to list the components to be included in the curriculum and how such components should be presented so that the curriculum can be successfully implemented and (2) to implement this curriculum in higher education. A total of 27 EFL students from a university in central Taiwan participated in the study. Various tasks were used to enable the students to actively explore the subject content and improve their language skills. Surveys and face-to-face meetings were also conducted to explore the students' perspectives regarding the course, and the results of their feedback revealed their positive attitude toward the course. The educational activities, procedures, final results, and reflections regarding further research are explained herein. This study contributed to the field of EFL blended learning.

Keywords: blended learning, curriculum design, English as a foreign language (EFL)

INTRODUCTION

To keep up with the current dynamic world, the educational field is continually changing (Pitaloka et al., 2020), and one recent trend is blended learning. Blended learning is a logical and natural evolution of the learning environment (Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017; Thorne, 2003). It has become popular (Al Zumor et al., 2013; Hoic-Bozic et al., 2008) in every sphere of academia (AlKhaleel, 2019), especially in higher education (AlKhaleel, 2019; McGee & Reis, 2012), because it can be used to provide an attractive, effective, and stimulating learning environment (Al Bataineh et al., 2019; Hoic-Bozic et al., 2008).

Blended learning combines both in-class and online instruction to attain the strengths of both instruction modes (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019; Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017; Pitaloka et al., 2020). In blended learning, online instruction does not displace traditional classroom teaching but rather adds a further dimension to the learning experience (Sheerah, 2020). This learning approach is based on various combinations of face-to-face lectures, learning over the Internet, and learning supported by technology and media (Hoic-Bozic et al., 2008). Thus, blended learning offers various teaching and learning methods (lectures, discussions, and guided practice sessions), content delivery modes (classical face-to-face and computer-mediated learning environments), active learning approaches (group and individual learning activities), and instructional modalities (synchronous and asynchronous interactions) to enhance the teaching and learning process (Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017; Hoic-Bozic et al., 2008; Pitaloka et al., 2020).

In relation to language teaching and learning, the incorporation of blended learning into English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching has attracted considerable attention (Pitaloka et al., 2020), including at the university level (Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017). EFL learning is a complex process that requires considerable effort to successfully immerse learners in the language (Al Bataineh et al., 2019). Blended learning plays a critical role in the EFL teaching

field (Altay & Altay, 2019) because it provides learners with a wide range of methodologically organized materials and resources (Alpala & Flórez, 2011). Face-to-face teaching is considered crucial in language learning to complement online instruction (Pitaloka et al., 2020; Tawil, 2018). In addition, blended learning supplements traditional classroom teaching and learning environments with technology-based instruction (Tosun, 2015); applying modern technology as part of the teaching process is considered desirable and useful for EFL learning (Sheerah, 2020). To strengthen the EFL learning process, ensure optimal learner achievement, and enhance the quality of teaching and learning, various approaches and methods should be employed, which agree with the core themes of blended learning (the combination of instructional modalities, delivery methods, and learning tools) (So & Lee, 2013; Yoon & Lee, 2010).

Face-to-face instruction and online instruction have their different advantages (Al Zumor et al., 2013). According to Soyemi et al. (2012), the advantages of classroom learning include promoting the open exchange of ideas (students exchange ideas and questions with each other, students interact with teachers without communication barriers, and students immediately address any difficulties or areas of confusion), creating a social environment (students learn how to behave appropriately and how to make friends and interact with others, students exchange ideas with their peers regarding the course or any other topics, and students can build friendships), taking care of individuals (teachers can identify learning problems with particular students and provide support), and enjoying practical exercises (students obtain hands-on experience with the subject being taught). According to Pitaloka et al. (2020), the advantages of online learning include learning flexibility (no time or space limitations), challenging tasks (new experience to complete timed exercises and quizzes), a broad range of understandable materials, and the potential for learning variations. In another study, McIntyre et al. (2018) indicated that the proliferation of smart mobile devices has offered new methods for delivering content to learners when and where they find an opportunity to study. They also reported that increasing students' access to learning resources across space and time is an ongoing goal for higher education.

Several researchers have highlighted the abundant benefits of blended learning. For example, McGee and Reis (2012) reported that blended learning reaches beyond the benefits of convenience, access, and efficiency because it integrates face-to-face and online instruction and matches each mode to the most appropriate learning tasks. In another study, AlKhaleel (2019) indicated that in blended learning, face-to-face time can be spent more effectively because learners can extend the material beyond what can be achieved in a traditional classroom setting. AlKhaleel further indicated that blended learning provides a novel learning pattern that appears capable of helpful in imparting knowledge beyond the limits of face-to-face courses. Rahim (2019) argued that blended learning motivates students to be in charge of their learning strategies. Al Bataineh et al. (2019) listed the following six benefits of blended learning. First, blended learning encourages dynamic, simultaneous, free, joint, and compelling learning experiences. Second, blended learning helps learners gain a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Third, blended learning enhances learning outcomes in terms of content, objectives, materials, procedures, and assessments. Fourth, blended learning effectively addresses the differences among individual learners. Fifth, blended learning enables easy management and control of a class. Sixth, blended learning helps reduce the cost of teaching per credit hour. Sheerah (2020) provided a more detailed statement regarding the fourth point. Sheerah proposed that the use of electronic educational technology may enable instructors to adjust their learning programs and courses to satisfy the needs and capabilities of individual learners, which can in turn positively affect the performance and academic achievement of students. Sheerah further explained that blended learning helps students control how, when, and where they learn while allowing them to personalize their learning process to enable them to acquire knowledge with the support of systems suited to their learning style.

Several researchers have highlighted numerous benefits of blended learning in EFL learning. For example, Liu (2013) indicated that students highly appreciate and benefit from

blended learning because EFL blended courses enhance their student–teacher, and student–student interactions, decrease their communication anxiety, motivate them to become more independent and autonomous learners, and improve their academic English writing ability. In another study, Altay and Altay (2019) indicated that blended learning leads to improved acquisition and language development as well as enhanced participation and motivation and enables students to extensively practice what they have learned in the on-site setting without being under any time or space limitations. According to Rahim (2019), blended learning provides a flexible learning platform (enhances learning anytime and anywhere), encourages students to practice the language inside and outside the classroom, endorses the motivation of EFL learners toward authentic language learning practices, and leads to improved academic achievement. Albiladi and Alshareef (2019) indicated that blended learning can be effectively used to develop the language skills of learners in interaction and engagement settings, enhance an English learning environment, increase students’ motivation toward learning the language, enhance the learning process, and help learners become independent. Peng and Fu (2021) reported that both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation exhibit a positive relationship with learning outcomes in blended learning, with an intrinsic interest in English and the intrinsic goal of understanding English culture being considered the two most essential predictors of learning outcomes.

Given the numerous benefits of blended learning, teachers should be encouraged to use this technique in their classes (Al Bataineh et al., 2019). However, how blended courses should be designed is a problem that remains to be addressed. To design blended learning systems and materials for language teaching contexts, several teaching modes, tools, and resources should be carefully integrated to ensure that the needs of learners are met and academic goals and positive learning outcomes are achieved (Murphy & Southgate, 2011; So & Lee, 2013). This means that, instead of simply bringing technology into the classroom and replacing textbooks with computer devices, blended learning should involve a redesign of the instructional model, a change in how teachers work with students, and giving students more control over their learning process (Sheerah, 2020). Thus, classroom teaching and online learning are not simply mixed in blended learning; a wide range of activities and tasks should be systematically organized concerning the modes, tools, and resources of language teaching and the learning approaches and methods, learner characteristics, and learning context (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; So & Lee, 2013). Instructors implementing blended learning should ensure that the online materials are adequately supportive of their students and that the learning methods, assessments, and workloads that students require to be successful are all considered (Sheerah, 2020). With the elaborate arrangement, blended learning is pedagogically supported through appropriate assignments, activities, and assessments, which can help meaningfully bridge any course gaps for the students (McGee & Reis, 2012).

Although several researchers have discussed blended learning in the context of EFL teaching, a systematic and well-planned blended course design has rarely been mentioned. Therefore, to fill this gap, the present study described and evaluated blended learning in EFL courses in terms of curriculum design. The curriculum design process involves the selection of which components should be included in a curriculum and the determination of how such a curriculum should be presented and its components arranged (Shiundu & Omulando, 1992). Furthermore, in blended learning planning, all aspects of the courses should be considered (Alpala & Flórez, 2011). Therefore, in this study, a curriculum design that thoroughly considers blended learning in the EFL context was proposed. The main objectives were (1) to list the components to be included in the curriculum of an EFL blended course and indicate how these components should be presented to ensure that the curriculum is successfully implemented and (2) to implement this curriculum in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, blended learning was used as a pedagogical method to describe the integration of classroom teaching with online instruction (including synchronous activities and asynchronous events). According to Sheerah (2020), striking a balance between face-to-face and online activities and time is critical to ensuring that all learners are catered to. Therefore, in this study, half of the blended learning design comprised online course instruction (synchronous and asynchronous), and the other half comprised face-to-face interaction in the classroom. In other words, online learning and traditional face-to-face instruction were considered equally valuable. Online learning is not a supplement to classroom learning; rather, online learning and face-to-face instruction complement each other. In online learning scenarios, the instructor performs teaching duties online, rather than just providing links and resources for the students. This means that the content and context of courses in online learning and face-to-face instruction are great consistency.

For an institution to ensure successful blended learning, the institution should provide a stable platform, quality internet access, and sufficient technical support, and teachers should guide their students regarding the use of the online platform. Online technology is not just a supplement but rather a core component of blended learning (Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017). Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) argued that adequate technical training should be provided to familiarize teachers who adopt a blended method with the internet, social networks, and various types of software. According to Alpala and Flórez (2011), teachers require support while handling technical problems with online technology so that they can help their students when any of these problems emerge. Wright (2017) indicated that institutions should ensure adequate internet quality. Similarly, Sheerah (2020) highlighted the importance of ensuring adequate school facilities to deliver blended learning in curricula. Manurung et al. (2020) suggested that learners should be given short training sessions on the chosen online platform and that institutions should ensure a stable internet connection and electricity supply.

The course syllabus for blended learning is divided into two parts: a face-to-face part and an online learning part. For the face-to-face part, the course syllabus is usually presented within a large system created and supported by a university, which offers information and links regarding almost every aspect of campus life. This course syllabus should contain certain information, including an introduction to the instructor, the class period, the classroom setting, target students, credit points, prerequisites (if applicable), teaching objectives, a course description, pedagogical methods, schedules, materials and references, requirements, and grading methods.

For the online learning part, the online course syllabus on the e-learning platform should contain certain statements that elaborate upon the online lessons, such as the general objectives, objectives of each unit, credit points, the structure of the units, critical dates on the course calendar, learning activities for each online lesson, procedures, and progress of each online lesson, online quizzes and tests, online assignments, grading methods, and assessments, prior knowledge (if applicable), pedagogies, and requirements. The information available on the e-learning platform should conform to that available on the university system but be more precise. McGee and Reis (2012) indicated that the alignment of activities, assignments, and assessments is key in blended learning as these factors help determine when, where, and how learners should participate. If students are aware of all the necessary information and of what they are responsible for, they are more motivated to participate, more prepared for deadlines and meetings, and more likely to assume more ownership of their learning process (McGee & Reis, 2012).

Some activities are better delivered in the classroom, whereas others are more appropriate for delivery online (Alpala & Flórez, 2011). In face-to-face instruction scenarios, not only should textbooks, references, and supplementary materials be provided, but also the online components should be reviewed to eliminate potential barriers for students. Alpala and Flórez further proposed that EFL course activities may involve internal and external resources to relate the course to cultural events and thus cultivate the international perspective of EFL students.

For example, exchange students or professionals from other institutions can be invited to the class to participate in cultural activities. According to Fan (2011), some researchers have proposed that language and culture cannot be taught separately and stressed the necessity of culture teaching in EFL courses.

In online instruction scenarios, instructional materials should be purposely designed to meet the requirements of online learning, with lecturing in both English and the native language of the learners being the preferred approach (Manurung et al., 2020). This study suggests that the main materials are teaching videos recorded by the instructor. The creation of these videos involves making decisions on pedagogical problems, such as how to present linguistic functions, grammar, vocabulary, sociocultural aspects, and levels of formality to fit the linguistic goals of the course (Bañados, 2006). The study load should be carefully considered and should be appropriate. Each teaching video should be downloadable, suitable to foster learner autonomy and display the current study load and academic progress. The materials and activities should conform to the general and unit objectives. The activities should be diverse and have variety, and most importantly they should examine and recognize the accomplishments of the students. Finally, the supplementary materials should include highlights of key points, examples, self-learning exercises, reflective learning sources, and links and resources.

In face-to-face learning scenarios, in addition to teacher–student activities and student-centered learning, creating a suitable environment in which students can interact is a critical process. For example, final team presentations or projects are an effective method to foster student collaboration and enable students to develop rapport and group cohesion. The instructor should ensure that all students, even those who struggle, play a valuable role in each project. Teachers should also encourage their students to execute their work tasks collaboratively (Bañados, 2006).

In online learning scenarios, both teacher–student and student–student communication are critical. According to McGee and Reis (2012), varied interactivity and prompt feedback are key to student engagement in blended courses. Several methods are available to ensure teacher–student online interaction. For example, the first method involves the e-learning platform providing information regarding the background of the instructor and their email or contact information. The second method involves the instructor holding regular virtual office hours and a teaching assistant or tutor being available after these office hours. The third method involves the instructor including conversations with students in both synchronous and asynchronous learning scenarios. Furthermore, the instructor should promptly answer the students' questions or provide instant and specific feedback on an online discussion forum. Timely feedback is necessary because it helps improve the learning process of students (Wright, 2017). The instructor may also provide feedback to the group as a whole or provide individual feedback to each student to meet their particular needs and support them (Bañados, 2006).

Several methods are also available to ensure student–student online interaction. The first method involves the e-learning platform providing information regarding each student's background, email, social media account, or personal webpage. The second method involves encouraging student discussions in both synchronous and asynchronous learning scenarios. The third method involves the application of online cooperative learning strategies, such as empathic learning (inspecting and learning from each other's work) and peer reviewing (critiquing and providing feedback to each other).

Although some tests and examinations are suitable in the face-to-face learning scenario, others are considered more enriching in the online scenario. According to Bañados (2006), speech skills should be assessed in face-to-face sessions, whereas skills that can be automatically corrected by a computer should be assessed online. In another study, Akbarov et al. (2018) reported that their students preferred taking their English exams in the paper-and-

pencil form even though they had a more positive attitude toward blended learning than toward the traditional approach. Therefore, critical exams (e.g., midterm or final exams) and dialogue practice should be conducted in the classroom, whereas completion-oriented tests and quizzes should be conducted online. Several guidelines can be offered for online learning assessments. For example, the record of the online learning portfolio should be one of the grading criteria. In addition, every unit should have its own online tests or quizzes, and the scores, correct answers, explanations, and feedback should be provided immediately after each test or quiz. Third, the learning assessments should match the content of the materials and unit objectives. Fourth, the learning assessments should help the students summarize the key points and inspire them to think deeply.

Alpala and Flórez (2011) highlighted the importance of constantly evaluating the virtual and face-to-face aspects of blended courses to confirm which are appropriate and which are not, given the needs and preferences of learners. Thus, in addition to the general teaching evaluations conducted by institutions, two other course evaluation forms are suggested. First, to understand the opinions of students and modify the course, specific questionnaires regarding the teaching process, materials used, online learning platform, and assessments should be completed two to three times each semester. These questionnaires can be completed anonymously online, and each instructor can make any necessary changes in accordance with the quantitative results of these questionnaires. Second, to allow the instructor to gather qualitative comments to address problems regarding blended learning, two to three face-to-face evaluation meetings are also recommended. The meeting times and schedules should be declared in advance in the announcement area to give the students enough time to engage. After each meeting, the meeting minutes should also be displayed in the announcement area to help others learn about the progress of and changes in the course.

The scores of the students should be kept within the university system, and the examination papers should be kept by the instructors for at least 1 year. The data and information of the online learning platform should also be kept for at least 5 years. The landing page of the platform should offer a guide regarding the hardware and software requirements, installation instructions, uninstallation tools, platform user guide, online technical support, and technical support phone numbers among other information. Moreover, the online learning platform should include an announcement area, several online discussion forums (an asynchronous message board), an uploading area for materials and teaching videos (asynchronous learning), and a synchronous learning virtual classroom (video conferences). The platform should also include several synchronous discussion rooms, a background information area (instructor background; instructor email or contact information; and each student's self-introduction, email, social media account, and personal webpage), an assignment area (containing different types of assignments and offering features such as posting, reminders, submission, marking and correction, feedback, empathic learning, and peer review), and a text and quiz area (containing different question types and offering features such as the setting of designated or random questions, reminders, submission, marking and correction, feedback, and ranking). In addition, the platform should include a learning portfolio (data and statistics on the date and time of logins and logouts, total duration of use, learning hours, discussion frequency, assignment results, text and quiz results, item discrimination analysis of texts, and quizzes, etc.), a survey area (offering features such as setting questions, completing questionnaires online, and statistical analyses), and an area for data or file import and export. All aspects of online learning should be handled on one learning platform that should be implementable on smartphones to prevent their being a technical barrier to entry in blended learning.

The online learning platform should give the instructor to have administrative authority, such as access rights; student grouping rights; and rights for the addition, revision, or deletion of materials and activities. Additionally, each instructor should fully utilize the functions of the online learning platform. For instance, they should take advantage of the announcement area

to make announcements regarding, for example, the timeline of the course or to send instant messages.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 27 EFL students (13 male and 14 female) from a university in central Taiwan participated in this study. All participants were English major sophomores who had been studying English for more than 10 years. Most of the participants had an intermediate level of English proficiency, corresponding to a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages level of B1. An elective EFL blended course with two credit points was developed to enhance the student's linguistic abilities through various tasks. Given that each semester in Taiwan is 18 weeks long, 18-course meetings were held. The blended learning course involved nine classroom meetings and nine online meetings (synchronous and asynchronous). The instructor met the students in person nine times in the classroom: three times in the first 3 weeks, once during the midterm exam week, once during the final exam week, once the week before, and once in the week after the midterm exam, and twice in the weeks before the final exam. However, no online learning sessions were conducted at the beginning of the course because the students needed to become familiar with the course first. Each face-to-face meeting lasted 2 hours.

Three synchronous learning sessions were conducted, whereas six asynchronous learning sessions were conducted. An online learning platform called Wisdom Master Pro was provided by the institution. At the beginning of the semester, the students were given information regarding the course and online learning platform. The dates of the synchronous and asynchronous sessions were announced in the class, placed on the online learning platform as a reminder, and posted on the door of the classroom. In addition, a teaching assistant was made available to help the students. The materials placed on the online learning platform were authorized in advance by the publisher, and the institution provided operating manuals for the instructors and students on the platform's login webpage. Technical support information was also displayed on the webpage, and various audiovisual media software and e-learning-related workshops were provided to the faculty members by the institution. The course syllabus was announced on the university system, which contained all course information and the personal data of each teacher and student. To increase the user-friendliness of the blended learning system, each person's username and password for the online learning platform were the same as those for the university system, and the platform function was simple enough for all the students to become engaged.

The instructor used the Wisdom Master Pro platform to make announcements, upload course materials, create learning content, distribute assignments, assess assignment results, arrange discussions, answer questions, and view the learning portfolios of the students, among other functions. The students used the platform to obtain information regarding the blended course, download course materials, upload homework or other files, ask questions, and participate in discussions. Attendance on the platform was digitally recorded, hence avoiding the need for manually recording the attendance of the students as in a classroom setting. The students used their mobile phones to access the platform, and the institution offered free internet access on campus. In addition to classroom and online teaching, the instructor used LINE group calls to interact with the whole class and personal LINE messages to send a reminder to any student when necessary.

The learning platform contained some basic information, such as an introduction to, the schedule of, and the calendar of the course. The platform also contained the email addresses of the students so that they could contact each other. In addition to the aforementioned fundamental information, the course required every student to introduce themselves in a paragraph and provide a personal webpage (e.g., Facebook or Instagram) in the online forum area. The instructor also provided information such as their self-introduction, email address,

personal teaching website, research expertise, and journal publications on the forum. The purpose of the specific self-introduction of the instructor and students was to provide a personal touch and encourage interaction. The announcement area of the online platform played a critical role in blended learning. Critical messages and reminders were displayed in the announcement area; 23 notifications were posted in total.

In addition to the announcement area, an online subject description section was established on the platform. The specific details of the course were posted in this section. First, some basic information was presented, such as the course objectives, credit points, structure of the units, and textbook introduction. Second, the grading standards and requirements of the course were announced. Third, the details of and instructions for the midterm and final exams were disclosed. Fourth, prior knowledge and target students who were suitable for this course were announced. Fifth, how the online and classroom learning activities could be accomplished was explained. Sixth, the online office hours of the instructor and the email of the teaching assistant were announced.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Overall, for the nine online meetings, the learning load was adequate (enough for the students to learn but not too much of a burden). The arrangements were as follows. First, the instructor recorded six teaching videos for asynchronous learning and uploaded them to the online learning platform. These teaching videos were downloadable from the platform for the students to watch offline (creating a convenient learning environment). Three synchronous learning meetings (video conferences) were directly held on and recorded by the platform so that the students could review them later. During the synchronous learning meetings, the students were encouraged to ask or answer questions. Each teaching video or synchronous learning meeting was at least 40 minutes long. The teaching videos and synchronous learning meetings included lectures, explanations of textbook exercises, and illustrations of course-related quizzes. English was used as the primary language of instruction, and the student's native language was used as the secondary language. Online analytics were used to monitor the usage of the learning platform during the semester. In total, 660 unique visits were particularly made to this course over the semester. Given that 27 students were enrolled, this number corresponded to an average of 24.44 visits per student, indicating high usage of and habitual access to the platform.

Second, nine information files, nine PowerPoint files, nine extracurricular supplement files, nine discussion forums, and nine tests were organized to match the nine online meetings. To help the students determine the corresponding items for each online lesson, the layout, and titles were carefully designed and named. Information files were used to explain the arrangement of the nine lessons, which were taught online either asynchronously or synchronously. These information files included the statements of structures, objectives, expected learning outcomes, pedagogies, procedures, progress, material highlights, examples and cases, references and resources, learning activities, assignments, tests, and requirements of each online lesson. PowerPoint files (related to the emphases of the textbook) and extracurricular supplement files (related to free online resources) were provided to the students to foster learning autonomy. These files were downloadable from the platform. The students were required to join discussion forums (an asynchronous message board), share their opinions, and comment on other opinions in each forum. The topics (related to the course and reflecting on what the students had learned that week) of the discussion forums were set in advance by the instructor. The instructor then reviewed the results and provided prompt feedback. As indicated by Rivers et al. (2014), asynchronous forums can help track and illustrate student understanding of specific problems and learning scenarios. The online tests matched the course content and employed questions of various types, such as fill-in-the-blank questions (completing a dialogue or sentence by using a word or short phrase from a list), matching questions (matching a word to its meaning), true-or-false questions (indicating the correct

sentence by using the word in bold), and multiple-choice questions (circling the correct word to complete a sentence). After the deadlines of the tests, the grade, correct answers, and explanations were provided. The purpose of these tests was to give the students plentiful practice and enable self-assessment.

Third, the students were required to finish four online assignments. These assignments were essay questions to help the students compile the key points in the course content and think deeply. Grades and feedback were provided after the deadlines of the assignments, and excellent examples were made available for the students to review. The students were allowed some time to complete their discussion forums, tests, and assignments. The duration was set in advance by the instructor and displayed on the platform. None of the students were allowed to submit their results after the deadlines to ensure that they would assume responsibility for their learning process. Fourth, the whole class was asked to join a discussion room (synchronous message board) with the instructor to mainly discuss the content of the extracurricular supplement files after studying them. Accordingly, 11 discussion room activities were held.

In the classroom teaching sessions, several textbooks, references, and supplementary materials were delivered, and online components were reviewed to eliminate any potential barriers to the student's learning. To integrate resources from inside and outside the school and enhance the international perspective of the students, several activities were held in the classroom. These activities were carefully planned and prepared in advance. Several meetings were also held between the instructor and each presenter before the event as follows. First, a professor from another university, experienced in international relations, was invited to deliver a brief presentation regarding international organizations. Second, two international exchange students were invited to deliver a brief presentation regarding their own culture. Third, the teaching assistant of the course delivered a brief presentation to share the extracurricular supplement files. Fourth, a student representative delivered a brief presentation outlining what they had learned from this course. Fifth, four international exchange students were invited to join the class and start panel discussions with the students. The 27 students involved in this study were divided into four teams, and each team interacted with one international exchange student, practicing their English conversation. The main topic was the exchange student's academic life in Taiwan and how they had learned English.

The midterm exam was delivered in paper-and-pencil form in the classroom. Some of the online texts helped the students prepare for the midterm exam (specific details were announced both in the class and the online announcement area). The exam papers were graded the following week. The final exam comprised a group project in which each group was required to produce an English microfilm. The project required each group member to participate (i.e., each team member was required to perform in the film). The 27 students were therefore divided into eight small groups, and each student was allowed to choose their group. All groups were required to join a chat room (a synchronous message board) several times to initially discuss their project (they met in person for further discussions later on). The instructor participated in the conversations of all groups and provided some guidance. The platform recorded the messages and attendance of the students. The average number of synchronous chat room meetings held by each group was 4.5. The final English microfilms were played in the classroom so that the students could learn from each other. The instructor commented on and appraised the microfilms, and the best microfilms were uploaded to YouTube for the students to review in the future. For this course, the students were evaluated in terms of their in-class and online participation, completion of online activities (e.g., forums, assignments, and tests), midterm written exam results, and final group project outcomes. All students passed the course, with the average score being 80 (out of 100). Given this average score and the high pass rate of the students, the course was considered successful (Hoic-Bozic et al., 2008).

Two online surveys were conducted during the semester. The main goals of these surveys were (1) to understand the student's level of acceptance of the course content (materials and

activities), (2) to determine the students' level of agreement with the blended teaching approach, and (3) to assess the students' preferences regarding the effectiveness and quality of the platform. Each survey comprised 12 questions, and the questionnaires covered three dimensions, namely the course content, blended learning, and the online learning platform. Each dimension was assessed using four questions, and a 5-point Likert scale was used to rank the students' level of agreement. The average satisfaction score in the first survey was 4.55 (the course content, blended learning, and online learning platform scores were 4.52, 4.58, and 4.56, respectively). The average satisfaction score in the second survey was 4.78 (the course content, blended learning, and online learning platform scores were 4.79, 4.77, and 4.79, respectively). These results indicated that the participants generally agreed with the teaching method of this course. After the surveys, two face-to-face evaluation meetings were held. The meeting dates were displayed in advance in the announcement area, and the meeting minutes were posted in the announcement area immediately after the meetings. According to the meeting results, the modification of the course was immediately effective.

During the first face-to-face evaluation meeting, the students provided the following feedback. First, they believed that the course was well-planned. Second, given the sufficient online interactive activities, they believed that the blended learning course increased their interactions with the teacher and other students. Third, when asked whether any changes were required, some students suggested adding vocabulary quizzes to the learning activities. Therefore, vocabulary quizzes were implemented in the classroom teaching scenario. The grades and correct answers were then individually provided immediately after the class. Statistics for the whole class' scores (without personal information) were displayed on the platform so that the students could be aware of their achievement levels without feeling embarrassed.

During the second face-to-face evaluation meeting, the students provided the following feedback. First, they indicated that they had learned much from the course, especially from the abundant materials and content provided on the online learning platform. Second, they indicated that the instructor was highly conscientious in summarizing words and practical sentences, and they perceived that the instructor was attentive. Third, they believed that the use of a group project as the final exam was a smart idea because it allowed them to learn by doing and gain experience through their cooperation. Fourth, they suggested adding more oral English dialogue practice. Therefore, conversation exercises were implemented in the classroom teaching scenario. Besides the instructor's corrections, these practices were recorded and uploaded to the platform for the students to view, improve, or emulate.

Toward the end of the semester, an anonymous online open-ended questionnaire was used to allow the students to express their opinions regarding any aspect of the course. The following positive feedback was obtained. First, the students believed that blended learning allowed them to learn anywhere and anytime. Second, they favored the idea of having classroom activities involving exchange students and professors from other schools. Third, they highly appreciated the patience of their instructor.

Discussion

Among the features of EFL blended courses are constructive cooperative learning and enhanced critical thinking. The EFL blended course developed in this study comprised several activities that could achieve cooperative learning. First, students were asked to not only share their opinions on online discussion forums (asynchronous message boards) but also comment on the opinions of others. This peer-review strategy enabled them to critique and provide feedback to each other. Second, the whole class was asked to join a discussion room (synchronous message board) with the instructor to mainly discuss the content of the extracurricular supplement files after studying them. These discussions and debates helped the students clarify several concepts and ideas. By exchanging views, the students could learn from each other. Third, the final exam comprised a group project that involved producing an English microfilm, and the students were required to join a chat room (synchronous message board)

with their counterparts several times to initially discuss their project (they met in person for further discussions later on). During the project, each group member was required to participate, and the students learned how to cooperate during the process. Fourth, the best group projects were uploaded to YouTube for the students to review, and the best assignments were made available for the students to scrutinize. This empathic strategy enabled the students to inspect and learn from each other's work.

The EFL blended course included several activities that helped enhance the critical thinking ability of the students. First, discussion forums (asynchronous message boards) were organized to match the content of each online meeting. The goals of these discussion forums were to enable the students to reflect on what they had learned and share their thoughts with others. Second, online tests were conducted that matched the content of each online meeting. These tests provided the students with practice and allowed them to make self-assessments. Third, the students were required to complete four assignments. These assignments were designed as essay questions to help the students compile the key points of course content and improve their critical thinking ability. Fourth, after the whole class had joined the discussion room (synchronous message board) with the instructor to discuss the content of the extracurricular supplement files, they could process what they had learned and were thus able to improve their critical thinking ability.

Various methods were used to assess the effectiveness of the EFL blended course as follows. First, the platform usage of each student was monitored. The results indicated that the students used the platform heavily, suggesting habitual access to it. Second, two online surveys were conducted during the semester that comprised 5-point Likert-type questionnaires to explore how the students perceived the course content, blended learning, and online learning platform. The results revealed positive responses; the students generally agreed with the teaching method of this course. Third, two face-to-face evaluation meetings were held immediately after the online surveys, and feedback was obtained from the students to gauge their attitude toward the course. The meeting results were encouraging, and the students made positive comments; for example, they reported that the course was well-planned, teacher–student and student–student interactions were enhanced, an abundance of materials and content was available on the platform, the instructor was attentive, and they could cooperate in teams. Fourth, in line with the aforementioned survey and meeting results, some students stated positive opinions in their answers to the open-ended question, including a positive attitude to the flexibility offered by blended learning (learning anywhere and anytime), the classroom activities involving an international perspective, and the patience of the instructor. In conclusion, the students were generally satisfied with the course.

CONCLUSION

To effectively and efficiently implement a blended learning environment in an EFL context, a systematic and comprehensive curriculum design is considered an integral element. This study addressed a critical problem in the context of EFL, that is, how curricula should be designed for blended learning in higher education. A set of arrangements were also developed and tested for the context of English learning in a blended learning environment. The outcomes were favorable, as evidenced by the various surveys, online access monitoring results, and course pass rate. Various components of the curriculum (e.g., teaching videos, materials, assignments, texts, and discussions) were used by the participants as learning experiences. Online material accessibility also played a critical role in helping the students learn. In addition, interactive components were promoted by various means to ensure teacher–student and student–student communication, which in turn enhanced the learning process of the students. Overall, this study helped enrich teaching ideas regarding the use of blended learning approaches in the EFL context and also helped confirm the strengths of blended courses in EFL learning. The curriculum designed herein can be modified to match the academic needs of

students with other languages or varied proficiency levels. Further studies may also adapt and employ the blended learning approach described herein to various courses or in other large-scale research. However, a pretest–posttest design is recommended to assess the effectiveness and influence of this blended mode of learning.

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