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Students' Perceptions of a Blended Course and its Effectiveness at a Mongolian University

Oyuntsetseg Namjildorj*
Corresponding Author's Email: oyuntsetseg@humanities.mn
University of the Humanities, Mongolia

Munkhtuya Buyandelger
Email: munkhtuya@humanities.mn
University of the Humanities, Mongolia

Azzaya Tserendorj
Email: ts_azzaya@humanities.mn
University of the Humanities, Mongolia

Abstract

Blended learning has been considered one of the modern delivery modes of teaching and learning since the COVID-19 pandemic outreach. Although e-learning has been developing in most countries, its importance and needs were highly acknowledged by all educational organizations worldwide during COVID-19. All educational institutions worldwide run online or blended courses at some stage of their training. Regarding temporary demands such as the pandemic, learners had to study through online learning, and now it has become one of their regular learning modes. Meanwhile, educational institutions and their stakeholders were experiencing both online and blended programs and were provided opportunities to compare different delivery methods. Therefore, blended learning and teaching have become a more profitable way of teaching, especially in higher education. This article investigates the student's perceptions of blended learning and its effectiveness based on the case of a Mongolian university. To achieve this goal, we conducted qualitative and quantitative research. The survey included 182 students from first-year to senior year to identify the challenges they faced, the experiences they gained, and their evaluation of the blended courses they enrolled in. The research questions were created on Google form, data was electronic via emails, and focused group interviews were conducted simultaneously. As a result of the survey, it has been revealed that there are several benefits and advantages to blended courses in the tertiary education sector of Mongolia. However, key factors such as the learning styles of Mongolian students, appropriate learning environment and course design, access to technology, and effective organization should be improved in the future in order to run the blended courses successfully.

***Keywords*:** *higher education institutions, blended course, blended learning, learning styles, teaching styles*

ELT WORLDWIDE
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ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

INTRODUCTION

In Mongolia, we have faced the same challenges and gathered similar experiences regarding e-learning. During the pandemic, higher educational institutions (HEIs) in Mongolia offered both online and blended courses; some still deliver their courses in a blended way. Once the blended course is provided, technological developments and its practical use in the education sector have been one of the main focuses to enhance the quality of the training. Moreover, modern students have lived in a digitally rich world and see apparent advantages in the blended learning model. For example, the University of the Humanities (UoH), Mongolia, has offered blended courses since 2021 using the Canvas educational platform. One of the offering courses is a general English course for all first-year and second-year students.

This article will focus on implementing a blended course in the English language at the UoH and its effectiveness. Many factors influence the effectiveness of blended classes, such as the learning environment, curriculum design, technological advances, and teachers' and students' ICT skills. Through this study, we aimed to find out the answers to the following questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions of blended learning courses?
2. Do the blended courses offered by the UoH meet the student's needs and demands?

Although there is no single finite definition for blended learning, we have used it as a combination of onsite and online experiences to use modern technological advancements in learning and teaching. It also provides specific benefits to students, teachers, and administration in several ways; increased access and convenience; improved learning, and decreased or more flexible costs (Stein & Graham, 2014). The numerous advantages of blended learning have been revealed in the literature, such as enhancing learning opportunities, offering practical learning experiences, facilitating learners' access to resources, motivating learners through communication, collaboration, and interaction, and supplementing course management activities through giving feedback and grading (Bath & Bourke, 2010).

Kashefi et al. (2017) emphasize that blended learning strengthens the connections among students, teachers, and students; other stakeholders are incorporated into the learning process (Kashefi et al., 2017). On the other hand, blended learning is a student-centered learning method that combines traditional face-to-face classrooms (synchronous learning activities) with e-learning activities (asynchronous learning activities) (Vasileva-Stojanovska et al., 2015). Research agrees that the success of e-learning and blended learning can largely depend on students and teachers gaining confidence and capability to participate in blended learning (Haddad, 2004).

Furthermore, blended learning consists of online and face-to-face teaching, and various teaching methods and classroom activities are used. According to Lazar et al. (2020), the ratio between face-to-face and online learning in blended learning varies, but the online learning factor should be between 33% and 50% and even as high as 80% (Lazar et al., 2020). Therefore, some consider flipped learning as a different approach. However, others view it as a blended learning model that delineates online and face-to-face instruction (Borba et al., 2016).

Griffith University also pointed out that they have adopted the term "blended learning" to address the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) to enhance learning and teaching activities. On the other hand, blended learning is a mix of delivery modes, teaching approaches, and learning styles.

ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

In the latest literature, blended courses are more effective than face-to-face and online courses. Studies on blended learning have shown positive results for teachers' and students' learning processes (Tong et al., 2022). Blended learning is a teaching approach that positively impacts students' and teachers' learning. Teachers can see students' learning needs through individual interaction, allowing them to adjust or design lesson plans to suit their learning progress (Attard & Holmes, 2022). Therefore, HEIs have paid more attention to blended courses and their curriculum design.

Technology is one of the essential tools to implement blended courses successfully. Advances in technology provide more opportunities for teachers to design and deliver their courses in ways that support and enhance the teachers' role, the student's individual cognitive experiences, and the social environment (Bath & Bourke, 2010). There are several benefits to adopting modern technology and blended approaches in academic settings. All these benefits can be obtained if blended course design is done intentionally, with a purposeful course design process and adherence to standards (Stein & Graham, 2014). In addition to this, the stimulus for this change continues to be technology's pervasive availability and functionality. It is mobile, ubiquitous, and interactive (Dew, 2010; Johnson et al., 2013), cited in (Garner & Oke, 2017).

According to Kintu et al., blended learning effectiveness has been investigated in previous studies considering grades, course completion, retention, and graduation rates, but no studies regarding effectiveness given learner characteristics, design features, and outcomes (Kintu et al., 2017). Therefore, our research has focused on the efficacy of blended courses based on the course design, learner characteristics, and delivery modes. Furthermore, learner characteristics and learning styles should be studied before the course commencement. Guskey (2000) emphasized that curriculum developers and planners must consider needs, learners' features, and contextual matters (Guskey, 2000). Several issues, such as IT skills, workload management, self-regulation, learning styles, and motivation, are included in the learner characteristics.

Regarding the rapidly changing social and technological changes, students prefer to study some courses online, allowing them to access lectures and seminar materials anytime and anywhere. It also empowers the students' self-directed learning and their responsibilities. Napier, Dekhane, and Smith (2011) summarized the benefits that students perceive in the blended format, including the availability of flexible scheduling, a sense of empowerment in establishing the pace of their learning, and a general feeling that they were assuming more responsibility in managing their academic progress. Meanwhile, students have great opportunities to study and work part-time outside the classroom to improve their soft and functional skills and put their theoretical knowledge into practice. Additionally, research shows that the failure of learners to continue their online education in some cases has been due to family support or increased workload leading to learner dropout (Park & Choi, 2009).

Moreover, studies by Chronicle Research Services (2009) and the U.S. Department of Commerce (2010) suggest that students will continue to demand increased access to technology and flexible asynchronous learning experiences. As part of this growing demand, The U.S. Department of Commerce identified several practices likely to increase in prevalence as students demand increasing convenience for post-secondary instruction. Firstly, students will increasingly expect access to classes from cellular phones and other portable computing devices. Secondly, they may sign up to take a course in person and then opt to monitor class meetings online and

ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

attend whenever they want. Thirdly, classroom discussions, office hours with a professor, lectures, study groups, and papers will all be online (United States Department of Commerce, 2010).

According to the statistics of 2021 from the National Statistics Committee of Mongolia, there are 21 provinces and 335 soums (towns). Eighty percent of all households use the Internet due to the introduction of high-speed Internet networks in 335 soums (towns) in Mongolia, and 98 percent of Mongolia's 15-year-old and older population has been using a cell phone (Ministry of Digital Development and Communication of Mongolia & National Statistics Committee of Mongolia, 2021; National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2021). Additionally, the use of other electronic devices, such as laptops and desktop computers, is increasing simultaneously. Therefore, this statistic shows there will be no problems in terms of technology when the blended courses are offered in HEIs in Mongolia.

Furthermore, Thomas and Brown (2011) conceptualize these emerging developments as a "new culture of learning" where engagement with information happens everywhere, not just in the classroom. In this new milieu, higher education moves from a stable infrastructure (i.e., learning as the acquisition of a defined collection of knowledge) to a fluid infrastructure where teachers and learners interact with knowledge and use technology to create novel applications for existing bodies of knowledge (Garner & Oke, 2017).

According to Bath and Bourke (2010), blended learning means "blending" *time* (face-to-face vs. recorded lectures), *place* (small group tutorial on-campus vs. online discussion forum; traditional field trip vs. virtual field trip using websites and online chat with industry personnel), *people* (podcast of guest lecturers, or virtual classroom to include both on-campus and off-campus students), *resources and activities* (textbook vs. online readings; in-class vs. online quiz).

The practical implementation of blended learning courses in higher education is a complicated process, especially when supplementing traditional teaching to achieve educational change (Kastner, 2020). There are no perfect teaching and learning methods; therefore, blending learning has some drawbacks. For example, less face-to-face interaction in an academic environment negatively influences students' and teachers' honest communication. In addition, the shift requires the instructors teaching a blended learning course to invest more time in becoming familiar with the available technology, create activities to complete in class, and reflect on and adapt the overall course structure (Edginton & Holbrook, 2010), as cited in (Kastner, 2020).

In this framework, ongoing improvement for blended learning is needed, and it will be done through three phases (Stein & Graham, 2014):

1. Engaging students with the course design
2. Evaluating student success with the design and understanding why the design was or was not successful
3. Designing a new version or revision based on what you discover through evaluation

Although the overall student rating for blended courses has been positive, the reduced traditional teaching and communication format and the required self-discipline, autonomy, and time management skills may be challenging for some students (Kastner, 2020). Moreover, there continues to be limited research that addresses the students' perceptions of blended courses.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore how students rate the quality of the English language course in blended learning and identify the challenges and difficulties to the effectiveness of blended learning in the tertiary education sector of Mongolia. Furthermore, the research results

ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

will have a tangible impact on improving the course design and learning outcomes since we attempted to find solutions related to increasing the students' perceptions towards blended learning and the effectiveness of integrated courses in the case of a Mongolian university. Overall, the research results will influence the advancement of the educational system of Mongolia, significantly higher education institutions which play an essential role in socio-economic development and shape our future.

METHOD

The present study aims to explore the appropriateness of blended learning methods to teach language skills. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected for this study. Data was collected through Google Forms and focus group interview protocols. Field notes and observations were used to do the analysis. Regarding the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were used to describe the results. A nonprobability sample was designed to include 150 students from freshman to fourth year. The final number of total valid participants was 182 (aged between 18 to 21) who were taking General English courses as compulsory at the UoH. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. As a nonprobability convenience sample was used, the findings may not be generalizable to other populations or settings. Furthermore, the study only includes students from one university, which may limit the applicability of the findings in other contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents' demographics consist of first-year to senior-year bachelor's degree program students majoring in teaching foreign languages at the University of the Humanities. In particular, 45.1% of all respondents are sophomores, 26.4% are junior students, 16.5% are first-year students, and only 10.4% are senior students.
The questionnaire was divided into three sections:

Section 1: Challenges (identify problems and challenges of the blended courses in terms of the students)

Section 2: Course design (focus on the design and content of the blended courses and clarify whether they met the students' needs)

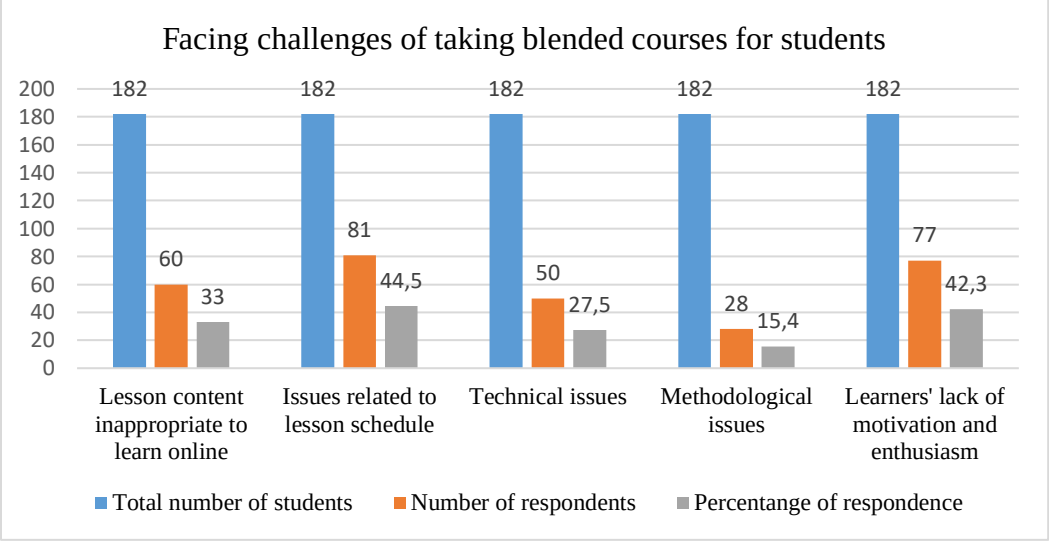
Section 3: Effectiveness (find out whether the blended courses were effective in general)

Challenges

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students were most affected and faced unpredictable challenges. Therefore, the first question of section one was to identify the challenges and problems encountered when the students took the blended courses.

Graphic 1. Learners' challenges and issues of taking blended courses

ELT WORLDWIDE
Journal of English Language Teaching
ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)



44.5% of the respondents admitted that they had problems related to lesson schedules, 42.3 % of them answered that they felt unmotivated and lacked enthusiasm, and 33% complained about the inappropriateness of lesson contents to take classes online, whereas 27.3% of them experienced technical issues, such as internet disconnection and only 15.4% of them concerned about methodological issues and inappropriate teaching methods for blended learning. To sum up, most of the students encountered problems related to lesson schedules. In addition, they needed help with concentrating on the online class due to immediate family issues and feeling incompetent and unmotivated, respectively.

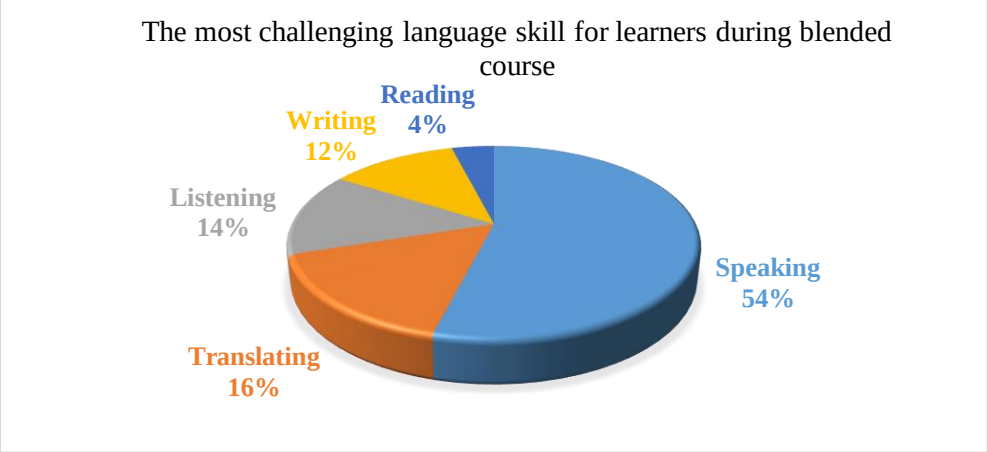
Based on the results, the critical problem is related to the lesson schedules. In terms of the HEIs, they need help in meeting the diverse needs of blended learning. In addition, many studies have shown that a shortage of technical facilities to support teachers and students in online education is a significant barrier for those wishing to offer an online curriculum (Dharmawardene & Wijewardene, 2021; Poon, 2013; Tong et al., 2022).

The next question was to identify a language skill that is difficult to acquire through blended courses. From the results, the most challenging language skill for learners during a composite period was speaking skill, which was 53%. On the other hand, 14% of respondents answered that listening skills were the most difficult to improve through the blended courses, 4% for reading skills, 12% for writing, and 16% for translating.

Language lessons differ from other subjects and require real-time communication and productive interaction between teachers and students, such as asking questions in the target language, having a free discussion based on the new structures, and organizing pair and group discussions. However, this kind of activity has been minimized regarding the blended course.

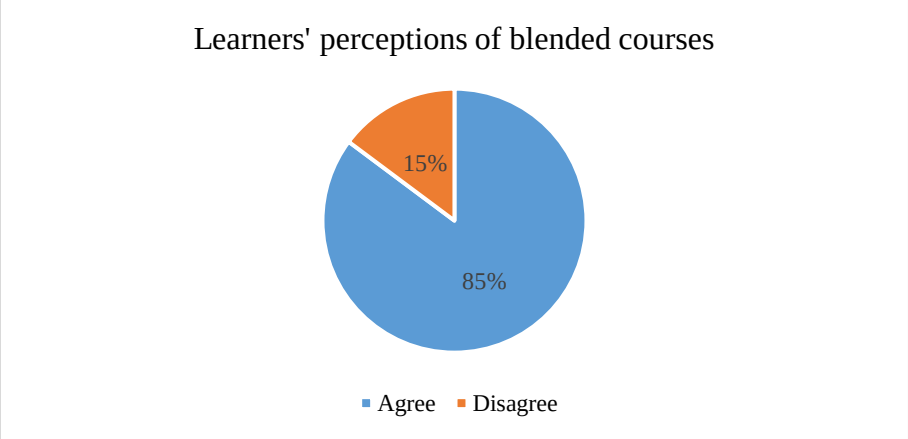
ELT WORLDWIDE
Journal of English Language Teaching
ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

Graphic 2. The most challenging language skill to improve through blended courses



The third question of section one aimed to clarify whether students consider blended courses an effective way to learn a language. Based on the questionnaire results, most respondents agreed that blended learning was more effective than face-to-face classes. Furthermore, only 15% of respondents argued that simultaneously attending online and offline courses were challenging. Based on this, it can be concluded that most students perceived blended learning as a method that provided opportunities to study at their own pace and encouraged them to be responsible for their studies.

Graphic 3. Learners' perception of the effectiveness of blended courses



Course Design

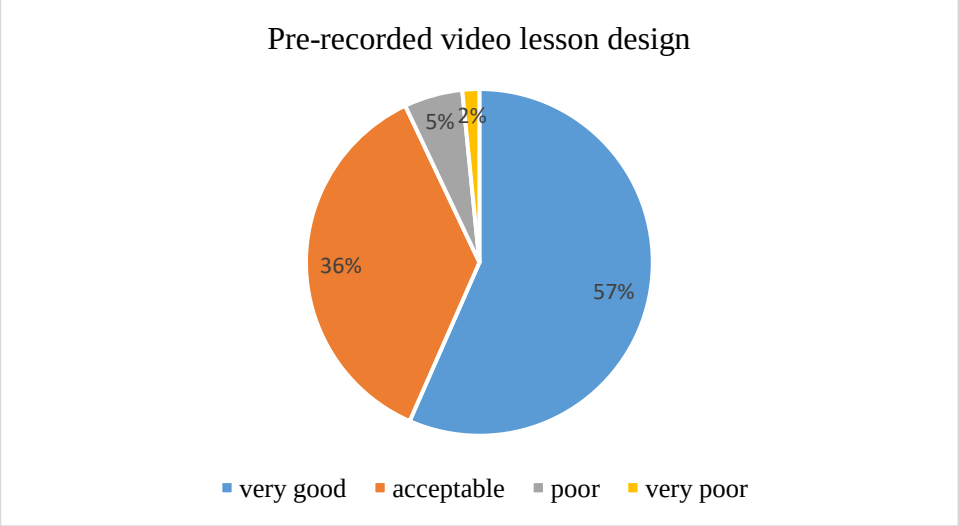
In section two, there are three questions to identify the effectiveness of the course design, content, and delivery. According to Kintu et al., the course design features include interactions, technology with its quality, face-to-face support, and learning management system tools and resources (Kintu et al., 2017). One of the essential contents of the blended courses we have offered at the university is preparing a video explaining each unit's critical aspects. For example, in terms of video content of the English courses, each team has three short videos, each lasting up to 5

ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

minutes. In the videos, the teachers explain the new structure and other essential points students need to learn from that lesson. In particular, several researchers highlighted that video use emerged as an element of technology that significantly impacts students' learning experiences (Huang et al., 2019).

The first question of section two was to clarify the convenience of the pre-recorded video lesson designs and formats. According to the research results, 57% of the respondents immensely enjoyed the pre-recorded video lesson designs and layouts. However, 36% responded that the methods and arrangements were acceptable, and about 7% considered them poor.

Graphic 4. Students' attitudes toward the pre-recorded video lessons

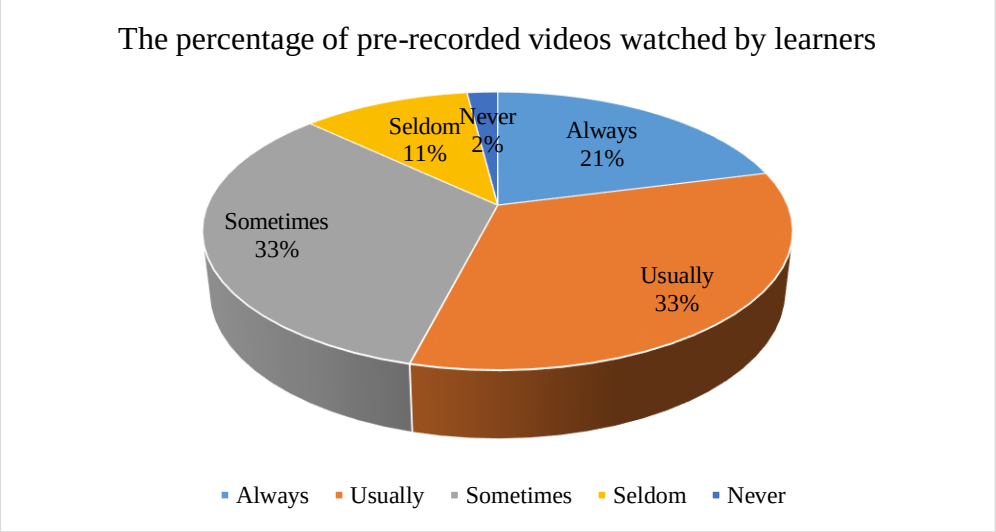


Our next question was to ensure whether the students watched pre-recorded video lessons prepared by the teacher. The question was asked because of the features of the blended courses at our university. In our university case, the students take one-hour live sessions per unit even though pre-recorded classes are placed on the online platform. The result showed that 21% of respondents answered that they always watched the pre-recorded videos prepared by the subject teacher, 33% of them usually watched the videos, and 33% of the respondents sometimes watched the pre-recorded videos, respectively. However, 11% seldom watched the videos, and 2% have yet to.

Based on the results, although the percentage of video lesson viewing varied, most students watched the videos to understand critical aspects of the class to some extent. Furthermore, pre-recorded video lessons are connected with the student's self-directed learning. Additionally, it can be understood as guidance to follow the course contents and complete course tasks. During the focused group interview, most participants valued the opportunities to re-watch the video content and work on the follow-up activities.

ELT WORLDWIDE
Journal of English Language Teaching
ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

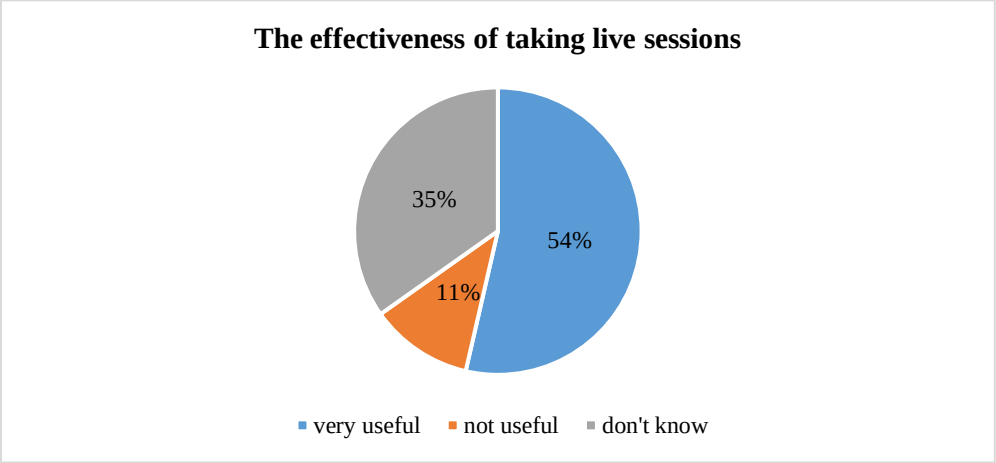
Graphic 5. Percentage of online video lesson viewing



Therefore, the next question was to find out how the students evaluate the live session of each unit.

The research result shows that 54% of the respondents answered that taking live sessions was very useful, 11% said it was not, and 35% said they needed to learn how to evaluate the benefits of blended courses. To sum up, most respondents found taking the live sessions practical.

Graphic 6. Students' attitude toward the live sessions

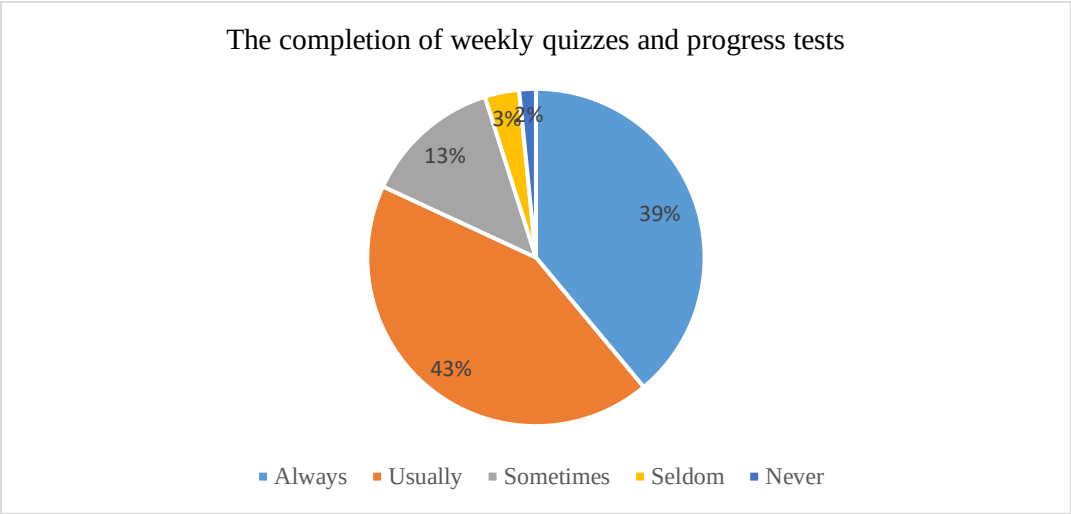


One of the features of our blended courses was weekly quizzes, progress tests, and assignments for each language skill every week. Generally, weekly quizzes are not accumulated to make a final grade for students. Instead, it will check the students' weekly improvement, which is one way to make students more responsible for their studies. Therefore, the next question was to identify whether they regularly complete the quizzes and other assignments designed for each language skill in the online course.

ELT WORLDWIDE
Journal of English Language Teaching
ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

According to the result, 39% of the respondents always submitted their weekly quizzes and progress tests by the deadlines, and 43% usually sent their weekly quizzes and progress tests. Nevertheless, only 2% were never offered the weekly quizzes and progress tests.

Graphic 7. Completion percentage of weekly tasks



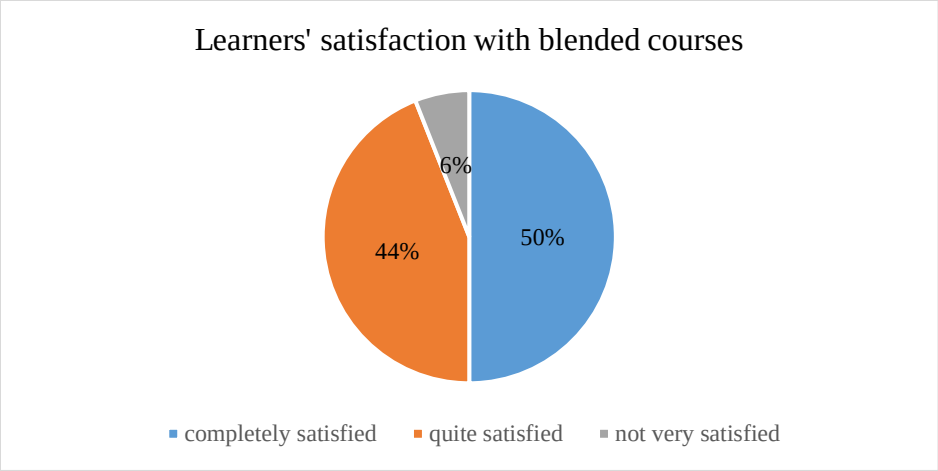
Blended Learning Effectiveness

Among the design features, technology quality, online tools, and face-to-face support are predictors of learner satisfaction. In contrast, learner characteristics of self-regulation and attitudes to blended learning are predictors of satisfaction (Kintu et al., 2017). Finally, motivation is seen as an outcome because, much as cognitive factors such as course grades are used to measure learning outcomes, affective factors like intrinsic motivation may also indicate learning outcomes (Kuo et al., 2013). At this point, we did not consider the students' grades in this study.

According to this study, section three was to identify the students' evaluation of their blended courses. The result showed that 50% of the respondents felt optimistic about blended classes, 44% were quite satisfied, and only 6% were dissatisfied with the combined courses.

Graphic 8. Learners' satisfaction with blended courses

ELT WORLDWIDE
Journal of English Language Teaching
ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

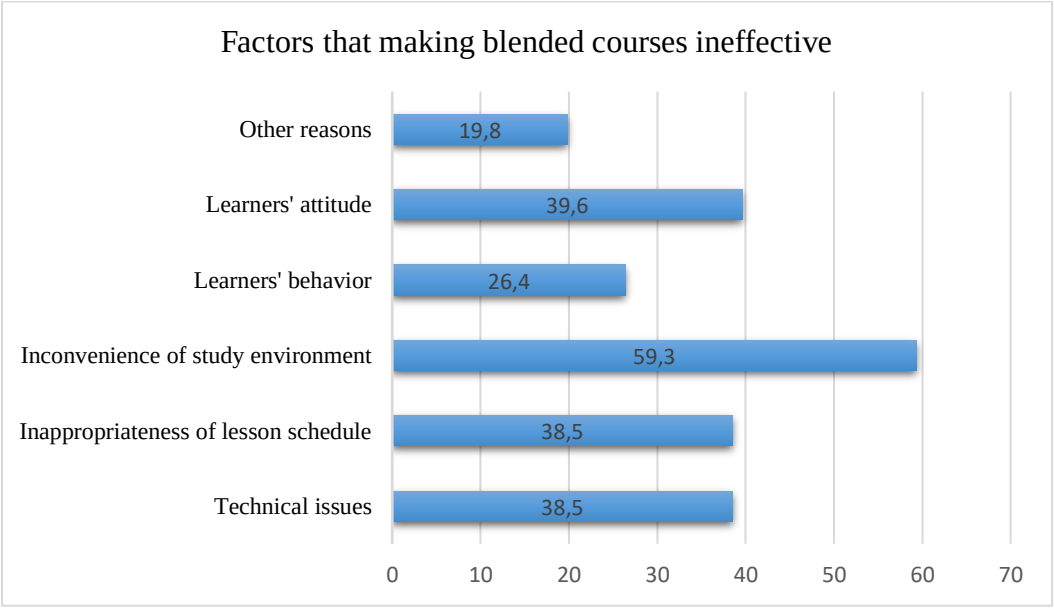


To summarize the questionnaire results, 50% of students were delighted with the blended courses, 44% were quite satisfied, and 6% were unhappy because of several factors, such as inappropriate lesson schedules, technical problems, some disqualified content, and different teaching and learning styles.

To improve the quality of the blended courses in the future, we organized a focus group interview with students who have different levels of experience. One of our questions was why some students preferred something other than blended courses.

The respondents named several reasons, such as technical issues (38.5%), the inconvenience of the study environment (59.3%), the learners' attitude and inactive manner (26.4%), and the inappropriateness of lesson schedules (38.59%). Finally, the main issues were the inconvenience of the study environment and learners' attitudes toward blended learning.

Graphic 9. Influencing factors on the ineffectiveness of blended courses



ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

Based on the focus group interview, it has been observed that the learning styles of Mongolian students influenced the learners' attitudes. In other words, Mongolian students tend to study much better under the complete guidelines and supervision of the teachers. Therefore, blended courses may have made them feel isolated and without guidance.

Discussion

We explored that blended learning and teaching is one of the most optimal teaching and learning methods, especially for students studying and working remotely. Looking back at the research results, most learners are willing to pursue their studies through blended courses. Notably, based on the research results, 50% of the students were positive about blended learning courses. Students' attitude toward the blended courses also relates to their characteristics and learning styles.

Three types of learner characteristics can be identified as in followings;

1. A learner with high self-directed learning and digital skills
2. A learner with low self-directed knowledge and digital skills
3. A learner with low intrinsic motivation and learning goals

The research results and teachers' observations show that students with high self-directed learning and digital skills are more likely to pursue their studies successfully than those with low self-directed learning skills and low digital learning experiences. Moreover, students with low intrinsic motivation and learning goals are less satisfied with the blended learning style.

In this case, when blended courses have been offered, teachers still need to pay more attention to students' cognitive development and learning experiences. In addition, one of the critical features of blended courses is their design, content, and formats. Based on the questionnaire, 57% of the respondents reported they liked to watch the pre-recorded video lessons very much because of their contents, designs, and formats and because they could re-watch them at their convenience anywhere and anytime. Therefore, HEIs have to develop and update them regularly.

The most critical factor of blended courses is their organization, such as schedules and mode of delivery. For example, almost half of the respondents (44.5%) said they had faced schedule-related problems, such as a live session being scheduled early in the morning or during the daytime when traveling to the university or home. Therefore, an effective organization of the blended courses has to be the center of attention during the implementation.

CONCLUSION

HEIs have always concentrated on the program's quality to meet modern society's requirements. One of those attempts is to change their delivery mode from traditional, classroom-based courses into blended courses that have brought several advantages to students, such as organizing their business and study time, developing their skills and knowledge in broader areas, and being more responsible for their studies.

Although blended learning and blended courses are getting more attractive these days and are discussed a lot in the educational sector, there are both advantages and disadvantages to blended courses. Additionally, there are several issues that HEIs have to consider, research insights, and fix in alignment with their own needs and demands. Based on the research results,

ISSN 2303 – 3037 (Print)
ISSN 2503 – 2291 (Online)

we have found the answers to the research questions we raised in this study so we could determine the students' perceptions of blended courses and other activities that Mongolian HEIs should improve the effectiveness of the blended courses.

According to the findings, an effective learning environment, learner characteristics, learning and teaching styles, and course designs are critical factors for the effectiveness of blended courses. In particular, most research participants complained about an inconvenient study environment and technical issues such as internet disconnection, low internet speed, mobile data usage, and inappropriate lesson schedules. Therefore, those must be the primary obstacles to successfully pursuing their goals through blended learning courses.

In conclusion, HEIs must seriously consider the factor of learner characteristics such as students' satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, self-directed skills, and knowledge construction to design blended learning courses and also do more research on the potential students' learning styles and focus on the ways to motivate them to learn through blended courses. HEIs should consider these issues when designing and planning to offer blended courses.

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