Factors affecting the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning environment in a Vietnamese university

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Abstract

The adoption of blended learning solutions in higher education has increased significantly over some years in many developing countries, including Vietnam. While blended learning has been well-researched in Western countries such as the USA, the UK and Australia, little has been known about blended learning in Vietnamese contexts. Previous research has indicated that the adoption of blended learning in higher education can be affected by numerous factors. Thus, my study aims to add to this research, by exploring factors that affect the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning approach in a Vietnamese university.

I used a mixed methods design approach for gathering data. Quantitative data were collected from an online survey to 339 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) second-year students at the university. Qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 7 students, 3 programme leaders (PLs) and 5 teachers at the university. The collected data were then analysed and interpreted using Engeström's (1987) Activity Theory as a framework.

Key findings indicated that the PLs' design activity, teachers' works and students' learning in their English blended courses were mediated by the Learning Management System (LMS) structure, the institutional regulations and their roles and responsibilities. The PLs and the teachers viewed the LMS as having affordances including helping deliver learning content materials and monitor students' online task completion. However, the constraints of the LMS such as a lack of communicational tools within the LMS and its behaviouristic features hindered students' blended learning experience. These constraints also prompted the teachers to use communicational tools external to the LMS to interact with students. The institutional requirements were also found to influence blended learning design decisions and teaching activities. Several online learning challenges inhibited students' blended learning experience including students' limited self-regulated learning skills, teachers' inadequate online facilitation; online assessment issues; and technical problems.

This study has several implications and recommendations for Vietnamese higher education institutions who wish to implement EFL blended learning. These include

raising institutional awareness of developing blended learning programmes to fit intended educational outcomes, considering students' knowledge and skills needed for blended courses, and providing ongoing professional development and support for both designing and teaching staff. Moreover, addressing technical issues and improving the LMS will make learning and teaching experiences of blended courses more rewarding

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List of Acronyms

ALM:	Audio-lingual Method
ASEAN:	Association of South East Asian Nations
CALL:	Computer-Assisted Language Learning
CEFR:	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CLT:	Communicative Language Teaching
EBCs:	English blended courses
EFL:	English as a Foreign Language
ELT:	English Language Teaching
GMT:	Grammar Translation
HERA:	Higher Education Reform Agenda
ICT:	Information and Communication Technology
L1:	First language
L2:	Second language
LMS:	Learning Management System
MOET:	Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam
NFLP:	National Foreign Languages Project
PLs:	Programme leaders
SLA:	Second Language Acquisition
SPSS:	Statistical Package for the Social Science

TESOL:	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
VUni:	Pseudonym for the university where this study took place
ZPD:	Zone of Proximal Development

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter presents my motivation for undertaking this research, the research objectives, and the significance of the study. It then provides a background to the study in relation to Vietnam including higher education reform; the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education; English language teaching (ELT) context, and the implementation of a blended learning approach in ELT at a Vietnamese university, to be referred to as VUni hereafter. The last section outlines the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Motivation for the study

I started my career as an English teacher at an international bilingual secondary school after I graduated from the University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam in 2004. After that, I have been working in the public university, the subject of this study, since 2006. In my university, English is one of the compulsory subjects for all non-English major students. In 2005, before I started working there, the time allocation for teaching English was extended from 180 class hours to 540 class hours because of the need for an improvement in English learners' communicative ability. The number of students in each English class was also reduced from 100 to approximately 50 students.

Despite these positive changes, I still remember I faced a number of challenges at that time, which discouraged me from teaching English in a communicative approach. Firstly, the exam-oriented education system forced me to mainly focus on tasks for form-based examinations rather than on activities to improve students' communicative competence. Secondly, the teaching workload that I was required to teach nearly 40 hours per week made me have very little time to prepare for effective Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) practice. As a result, my teaching practice mainly followed textbooks and I tried to cover all the lesson contents. Next, the large-size classes with mixed levels of students' English proficiency also challenged me to implement speaking activities in class time. I had difficulties in encouraging all students to actively engage in communicative

activities. Low-level students often sat in the back rows in the class and feared to speak English, and high-level students sitting in the front rows felt bored when being asked to do pair work with low-level students.

My university first decided to adopt a blended learning approach, simply defined as the integration of online and face-to-face instruction (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) in ELT for non-English major university students more than 10 years ago. Instead of 90 hours of face-to-face classes each semester, students had 30 hours self-study time using an online Learning Management System (LMS), on top of 60 hours of face-to-face classes with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. The online learning resources were developed by both EFL teachers and an external online course provider. The service provider designed the LMS based on the course outlines written by a group of selected EFL teachers at the university. There were learning resources and tools within the LMS such as lectures on grammar, vocabulary lists, basic drills in English skills, a discussion board, dictionary, text-to-speech and a voice recorder, which were organized depending on the individual unit in the textbooks.

Implementing a blended learning approach at that time helped my university deal with the lack of teachers and classrooms for ELT. However, for unknown reasons, the blended programme lasted for only three years, and no results were made available that reported on the effectiveness of that program. It was also unknown whether the implementation of a blended learning approach in ELT brought improvements in pedagogy or promote students' communicative competence. Hence, when a blended learning approach in ELT was adopted again in 2015 at the university, I became compelled to examine what factors can affect the teaching and learning English in a blended learning environment.

1.2 Research objectives

The present study aims to explore factors that affect the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning environment in a Vietnamese higher education context.

The overall research question that guides this study is:

How do factors within a Vietnamese university context affect the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning environment?

In order to address the above question, it is necessary to take into account different stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of English blended courses. As a result, the thesis will seek answers to the following research questions.

1. What are Vietnamese programme leaders' perceptions and practices of a blended learning design?

2. What are Vietnamese teachers' perceptions and practices of a blended learning approach?

3. What are Vietnamese learners' perceptions and experiences of a blended learning approach?

4. What factors contribute to affecting the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning approach?

1.3 Significance of the study

This study has the following importance.

Firstly, blended learning appears to be a new teaching delivery mode in the Vietnamese context (Bouilheres, Le, Mcdonald, Nkhoma, & Jandug-Montera, 2020; N. T. Hoang, 2015) even though it has become a popular teaching delivery method in higher education (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Graham, 2006; Tham & Tham, 2011). Blended learning has the potential to positively alter the kinds of learning students have been exposed to (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). In particular, a blended learning environment may make it easier for language teachers to provide students with rich, authentic target language input, and self-paced learning opportunities as well as facilitate students' active and collaborative learning (Joosten, Barth, Harness, & Weber, 2013; King, 2016; Marsh, 2012). However, research on the implementation of blended learning in general and in language

education indicates that implementing blended learning can be affected by numerous factors concerning students, teachers and institutions (e.g., Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; COHERE, 2011; Taylor & Newton, 2013). The university in which this study took place is one of the few universities in Vietnam to employ a blended learning approach to English teaching at tertiary level. An extensive search revealed very few studies identifying factors that affect the teaching and learning of English blended courses in higher education in Vietnam. Therefore, this study could make a valuable contribution to relevant literature in the field of blended learning research in Vietnamese higher education contexts. The findings may raise education practitioners' and administrators' awareness of factors that may influence the implementation of blended learning.

The second contribution of this study centres on the methodological framework used for exploring factors affecting the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning environment. Engeström's (1987) expanded Activity Theory framework, based on Vygotsky's basic mediated action (1978), is a systematic approach to data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the findings (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). While researchers discuss a variety of factors that affect the implementation of blended learning (Alebaikan, 2010; Hong & Samimy, 2010; Moskal & Cavanagh, 2014; Taylor & Newton, 2013), very few address the interactions and systemic tensions between such factors. Using Activity Theory (see methodology chapter) helped me identify and explore the dynamics existing between each of these factors in a more interactive approach.

The final contribution of this study concerns its findings and implications. The findings of this study can be of great significance to the success of Vietnamese higher education reform with regard to the integration of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in teaching EFL to improve the quality of education (MOET, 2008a). In addition, the implications of this study may be useful for other higher education institutions in Vietnam and in other developing countries as they also explore the adoption of blended learning in EFL teaching and learning.

1.4 Background to the study

This section briefly introduces the higher education reform context in Vietnam; the integration of ICT in education in Vietnam; ELT in Vietnam and the implementation of blended learning in ELT.

1.4.1 Higher education reform context in Vietnam

The reform of tertiary education in Vietnam is linked to the socio-economic development strategy. When Vietnam implemented the open-door policy in the economy, higher education is regarded as "a key driver in the country's move from a centrally controlled economy to a market-led economy with a socialist orientation" (Harman & Nguyen, 2010, p. 66). Thus, the higher education system underwent significant changes in relation to its size and diversity (Hayden & Lam, 2010). Since 1993, the education system has expanded at a rapid rate. In 1992-1993, there were 162,000 higher education students in Vietnam, representing a gross enrolment rate of approximately 2 percent. By 2006-2007, the gross enrolment increased to about 13 percent with the total of 1.54 million students. Additionally, the higher education system has also become more diverse. In 1992–1993, there were 103 higher education institutions and nine of these institutions were classified as universities. There was only one non-public institution. By 2006–2007, there were 322 higher education institutions, of which 139 were universities, and the number of non-public universities and colleges had increased to 47. In general, there have been positive changes within the Vietnamese higher education system to both increase and diversify the number and types of institutions.

Moreover, mindful of a need for a "further radical reform of the system" (T. N. Pham & London, 2010, p. 51), the government set up the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) to "renovate higher education fundamentally and comprehensively" (Vietnamese Government, 2005, p. 1). One of the major goals of HERA is to reform teaching and learning by shifting from the instructional to the learning paradigm with a focus on learners and the quality of learning experience. Teachers in Vietnamese higher education institutions are required to

shift “from passive to interactive teaching modes” and “problem-based learning methods” that “strongly promote learners’ activeness and increase their ability to participate in teamwork, adapt to their jobs and their future careers” (Harman & Nguyen, 2010, p. 68). This student-centred approach also requires a change regarding teachers’ roles. Teachers become facilitators of students’ active and deep learning by “applying a range of innovative learning process” and linking “learning with life experiences and service in the community” (Harman & Nguyen, 2010, p. 68).

In order to improve teaching and learning and productivity in the classroom radically, the Vietnam Government has identified the integration of ICT in education as a key (MOET, 2008b). The use of ICT has benefits to change traditional forms of teaching and learning by liberating learning from constraints of time and space. For example, technology offers an instant access to information from anywhere at anytime, and the ability to engage with learners using a variety of online tools, that have been identified in the literature (EDUCAUSE, 2010; JISC, 2009; Katz, 2008). Moreover, advances in technology have offered potentials for computer-assisted learning and e-learning. These require teachers to modify their teaching role, reducing the focus on the role of subject experts. Instead, teachers need to be more skilled in facilitating students to use rich available information and promoting students’ active and collaborative learning (Harman & Nguyen, 2010). In other words, the utilization of ICT in education is likely to have an impact on teachers’ role and pedagogy. The impact on pedagogy can be summarised as teaching strategies that are more student-centred, enabling more collaboration, more active learning and giving learners greater access to information. Thus, the application of ICT in tertiary education is considered as an important option for the higher education reform in Vietnam.

However, the pressing need to reform higher education in the current era of revolution of ICT in education and a knowledge-based economy (Harman & Nguyen, 2010) seems to be challenged by Confucian ideals, which framed Vietnamese higher education system for many centuries. Vietnam is a country in South East Asia with a long history of being colonized by Chinese for nearly a

thousand years before Ngo Quyen (King of Vietnam from 938-944 AD) defeated the invader and declared the independence of the country in 938 AD. However, during the following centuries until the mid-nineteenth century, Vietnam continued to be under the Chinese domination. Thus, Chinese cultural values such as Confucianism deeply influenced Vietnamese's educational philosophy and practice. Particularly, hierarchical principles in social relationships, an important aspect of Confucianism, were reflected in students' high respect for teachers and knowledge (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Students often view teachers as a main source of knowledge and tend to accept or obey what teachers teach (D. N. Tran & Williamson, 2009). The Confucian ideals of teaching and learning also emphasised memorisation of textbook-based knowledge and encourage little self-reflection (Hofstede et al., 2010). Studies indicate that the approach to teaching in Vietnam was mainly transmitting knowledge over questioning, problem solving and critical thinking (Ho & Hau, 2010; T. T. Tran, 2013b). As a result, students' passive learning was reinforced by such teacher-centred approach to teaching.

Moreover, Vietnamese culture is collectivist, in which people value the harmony in and the common interests of the community (Tuong, 2002). Parents believe that learning will help their children to attain success and have a social status, which is good for both children, their family and the community they belong to (P. A. Nguyen, 2004). Thus, students, their parents and the society pay a high respect for teachers since teachers play a crucial role in students' achievement (Hofstede et al., 2010). However, according to Hofstede et al. (2010), there often exists a large power distance between the student and teacher in collectivist cultures. For example, Vietnamese students rely heavily on teachers' instructions, and are expected to listen, follow and please teachers rather than interrupting, challenging, or confronting (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; T. H. A. Nguyen, 2002; Tuong, 2002). Teachers often remains a dominant way of instruction in the class and take control over all students' learning activities. Active participation, interaction and collaboration of students are not encouraged in traditional Confucian classes. The conversational pattern between teachers and students in the class is one-way, in which teachers normally take the initiative to interact with individual students or the whole class (Tuong, 2002). Meanwhile, students only respond to the teacher

when they are required rather than asking for helps or expressing their learning needs.

In short, one main objective of HERA is to transform the educational system by applying ICT in education, and this new idea may be challenged by Vietnamese traditional Confucian beliefs and practices.

1.4.2 The Integration of ICT in higher education in Vietnam

This section discusses the Vietnamese policy context where in recent years, the use of ICT in higher education has been advocated, in particular the use of e-learning and blended learning.

In higher education, the term e-learning refers to "flexible learning as well as distance learning, and the use of ICT as a communications and delivery tool between individuals and groups, to support students and improve the management of learning" (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2005, p. 5) while blended learning is commonly defined as the combination of online and face-to-face instruction (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Since the 2000s, the Vietnam government has been interested in implementing the use of ICT broadly into education, as well as e-learning and blended learning more specifically in higher education. The widespread use of ICT in higher education has been promoted by a number of ICT policies. Vietnam launched the ICT Masterplan for the period 2001-2005 (MOET, 2001). The ICT Masterplan provided directions for information technology development and application in education to meet the demands for educational reform in relation to content, teaching and learning methods, as well as in educational management (Peeraer, Thy, & Ha, 2009). Following on from this, Vietnam issued a directive on promoting teaching, training and applying ICT in education in 2008 (MOET, 2008a). The major tasks included: strengthening the integration of ICT in renewing teaching and learning methods at different levels; and developing educational and e-learning programs.

In response to the demand for e-learning in the education sector, the government contracted the telecom operator Viettel to improve the school systems'

information technology infrastructure. As a result, all schools across the country have free Internet connectivity (V. Hoang, Tong, Hoang, & Nguyen, 2016). In May 2014, the Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam (MOET) signed another agreement with Viettel to use the deployed infrastructure to enhance e-education with various ICT applications such as e-books, e-schools, and e-learning in the period 2014-2020.

Over the period of 2003 to 2017, encouraged by the government's policy, educational institutions in Vietnam have made initial achievements regarding ICT and e-learning development. All schools and universities have websites for sharing information and for learning purposes. A number of public universities have offered e-learning programs for students such as Vietnam National University, Hanoi University of Technology, Open University and Can Tho University (Do, 2013). E-learning has been implemented in a variety of disciplines such as business and administration (C. T. Dang & Foster, 2015), biomedical engineering education (Huy, Thuan, & Hai, 2010), and medical education (Churton, 2011). Compared to e-learning, blended learning is not a familiar term in Vietnam. While not often explicitly referred to in government policy documents, the term *blended learning* is only used in some projects provided by international organizations such as AusAID or the World Bank.

1.4.3 English language teaching in Vietnam

Under the influence of globalization, English in the modern period has expanded from national to international domains, becoming a 'world language' (Halliday, 2003). The expansion of English language teaching into state education systems is associated with both educational and economic development because:

> National governments and individuals worldwide seem to see teaching a language (English) to all learners in state schools as an important means of increasing human capital on which future national economic development and political power depends. (Wedell, 2011, p. 275).

Vietnam is a case in point because the history of English language teaching in Vietnam is closely combined with politics, economy and social affairs (S. Wright, 2002). There are two main periods in English language education history in Vietnam: English in Vietnam before 1986 and English in Vietnam from 1986 up to the present.

Before 1986, teaching and learning English could be subdivided into two periods. The first period was from 1954 to 1975 when Vietnam was separated into two regions – North and South. While North Vietnam was allied with the former Soviet Union, South Vietnam was under the influence of the USA. Thus, the status of English was different in each region of the country. In the North of Vietnam, English was considered as one of four foreign languages (Russian, Chinese, French, and English), and Russian ranked the first in the formal educational system because Russian was studied for communicating with the former Soviet Union. In contrast, English was the dominant foreign language in the South due to the need for direct interactions with the USA.

Between 1975-1986, Russian remained the dominant foreign language in Vietnamese formal school systems nationwide (North and South), because of the increasingly strong relationship between Vietnam and the former Soviet Union. English lost its popularity in the South, and was mostly taught in urban high schools. At tertiary level, the number of students enrolling for English both as a discipline and as a subject also decreased. At that time, the popular approach of teaching English was the structural approach that focused on lexicogrammar, reading and translation skills (V. V. Hoang, 2018). Teachers taught the structures of the language and students learned to master patterns of sentences by using substitution, transformation and translation techniques.

From 1986, English rose to become the universal language of business, diplomacy and education since Vietnam implemented its economic open-door policy. Due to this economic reform, Vietnam attracted a "stronger flow of direct foreign investment" (Le, 2019, p. 9). This change created the need for an English-speaking labour force. The need became more pressing when Vietnam joined a range of international organizations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations

(ASEAN) in 1996, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation in 1998 and the World Trade Organization in 2007. English is the sole working language of ASEAN nations. It is imperative that "citizens of the Member States [are pushed to] become proficient in the English language" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009, p. 3) to participate in "the global economy" and to become "an economic global player" (Sayer, 2015, p. 50). As a result, developing foreign language proficiency, especially in English, has become a key to Vietnamese human capital development.

In 2008, MOET launched the 'National Foreign Languages Project 2020' (NFLP 2020) for the 2008-2020 period to reform English language education in Vietnam (Vietnamese Government, 2008). One core objective of this long-term project was to ensure that by 2020, most Vietnamese students graduating from vocational schools, colleges, and universities will be able to use English confidently and independently "to communicate, study and work in the globalized, multilingual and multicultural environment of integration (Vietnamese Government, 2008, p. 1). Another objective was to enhance English teachers' English language proficiency and knowledge of language pedagogy and language acquisition (Vietnamese Government, 2008). Those objectives have resulted in a number of changes in English language education in public sectors. In particular, English has been implemented as a compulsory subject in schools from Grade 3. English teaching hours in formal education increased from 2 class hours (45 minutes each) to 4 hours per week. Curriculum have been designed or redesigned with the focus of improving communicative skills for Vietnamese students using student-centred approach.

MOET also set National English proficiency benchmarks for students and teachers, compatible with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Vietnamese Government, 2008). Accordingly, undergraduates are expected to achieve level B1 or B2, and high school and university teachers are required to achieve level C1. Subsequently, teachers' English proficiencies were then assessed based on that framework. The results of the nationwide assessment on teachers' English proficiency in 2011-2012 show that 91.8% of the upper-

secondary English teachers assessed did not meet the C1 benchmark, nor did 44.6% of college and university English teachers (N. H. Nguyen, 2013). Therefore, English teachers of all educational levels undertook 400 hours of learning to improve their English language proficiency. Despite intensive training, by the end of 2015, the percentage of teachers who met the proficiency requirement was still below the expectations (N. H. Nguyen, 2013).

With regard to students' English competence, research indicates that after years of learning English, secondary school students in particular, and learners in general, have remained communicatively incompetent (Le, 2015; T. T. Tran, 2013a). T. T. Tran (2013a) remarked that on leaving university, "many graduates could not communicate in English in some simple situations" (p. 143). Also, according to T. N. Pham and London (2010), undergraduates generally are not able to use English in their work unless they have undertaken extra English studies.

On November 16, 2017, the Minister of MOET, Mr Nha, admitted that "the government failed to meet the goals of the National Foreign Language scheme for the 2008-2020 period" (Vietnam Breaking News, 2016, p. para.1) after nine years of its implementation. There are several challenges that may have contributed to the undesired outcomes of NFLP 2020, which are discussed in more detail in the next section.

1.4.4 Challenges to English language teaching in Vietnam

Research in Vietnamese contexts reveals that there are tensions between the goals identified in NFLP 2020 and the current methods of EFL teaching and learning in Vietnam. Teaching EFL based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is "the central pillar of Vietnamese government rhetoric" (Nunan, 2003, p. 606). The goal of CLT is to develop all components of learners' communicative competence, rather than being restricted to grammar or linguistic competence (H. D. Brown, 2007). EFL teachers in a communicative teaching class need to help learners to "engage in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of languages for meaningful purposes" (H. D. Brown, 2007, p. 241). Although the main goal of NFLP2020 was to promote students' English communicative ability, it appears that the

grammar-translation method and teacher-centred approach remain teachers' dominant teaching methods in Vietnam (Le, 2011, 2015; H. T. Nguyen, Warren, & Fehring, 2014; T. M. H. Nguyen, 2009). For instance, H. T. Nguyen et al.'s (2014) study reveals teachers' practice in English classes in the following description:

> The common classroom activities were those where the teachers looked at the course book and explained the lesson content. The students did the exercises in the course book, and then the teachers called upon the students to stand up to read the answers aloud or write the answers on the board. (p. 101)

There are a number of contextual factors that discourage the implementation of the CLT approach in English classes. First, one of the factors is the inequality of access to English (Le, 2015; H. T. Nguyen, Fehring, & Warren, 2015). Particularly, Vietnamese students do not have opportunities to use English to interact and communicate outside the classroom. Thus, students practice what they have learnt only within classrooms (Ton & Pham, 2010). Students in poor families or in rural areas do not have exposure to a range of English language inputs outside classroom except for few hours per week of formal instruction (Le, 2015).

Secondly, large-size classes also prevent teachers from implementing CLT in English classes effectively. When teaching a large-size class (more than 40 students of mixed-levels), teachers are faced with difficulties in designing communicative activities appropriate to students' diverse learning needs and proficiency levels (T. N. T. Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Le, 2011; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2015). In a large class, it was difficult for the teachers to control and manage the class well. It was also especially difficult and time-consuming for the teachers to conduct communicative activities such as pair work and group work. For example, low-level students often reluctantly participate in working in pairs and groups while more proficient students tend to prefer working with those who have the same level of English proficiency.

Thirdly, the exam-oriented education system has also been identified as a barrier to the teaching of communicative language. Generally, teachers and students tend to spend class time on practicing tasks to prepare for grammar-based examinations, not for improving students' communicative competence (Le, 2011, 2015).

Fourthly, ELT practice, and education in general, in Vietnam at all levels has been greatly influenced by Confucian culture (Le, 2011; T. Q. T. Nguyen, 2013, 2017). Confucianism promotes a hierarchical culture, that is, people of lower ranks must respect those of higher ranks. In education, teachers are highly respected, and students tend to listen and learn the knowledge that teachers transmit. The common interactive pattern in Vietnamese classroom is: teacher initiates – learner responds – teacher comments. This pattern seems to restrict learning because it is the teacher who completes the interaction and makes the concluding evaluations. Therefore, the dominance of teacher-fronted instruction in the traditional Vietnamese classroom context (Bao, 2013; T. L. G. Hoang & Filipi, 2019) seems to make students feel resistant to participate in communicative activities in EFL classes.

Lastly, inadequate pre-service teacher training and the lack of teacher professional development also appears to hinder the quality of English language teaching (T. N. T. Bui & Nguyen, 2016; M. H. Nguyen, 2013; T. M. H. Nguyen, 2017). For example, M. H. Nguyen (2013) shows that the Vietnamese university's pre-service EFL teacher training curriculum focused heavily on developing teachers' knowledge of English proficiency and communication skills but little to contextual knowledge (i.e., an understanding of how language teaching practice is influenced by institutional factors such as language policies, teaching resources, testing factors, students' background and prior learning).

Given such challenges, MOET promoted the application of ICT at all levels of education as a way of moving away from existing traditional form of teaching and learning. Several higher education institutions have attempted to use ICT to implement blended learning in teaching English in Vietnam. However, recent studies in Vietnam indicate that factors discouraging effective integration of ICT in an EFL setting include: teachers' limited knowledge and skills in employing

technology in teaching (T. T. N. Pham, Tan, & Lee, 2018); inadequate ICT infrastructure; and a lack of ICT use training and support (V. G. Ngo, 2016). Thus, it is necessary to investigate what factors may affect the successful implementation of blended learning approach in ELT, and whether blended learning may help facilitate students' English learning.

1.4.5 The implementation of blended learning in ELT at VUni

VUni has a long history as a public university in Vietnam, providing fulltime courses in a range of disciplines. Informed and encouraged by government policy around innovation in education, VUni has prioritized the development and application of ICT in EFL education in order to up-scale and improve teaching and learning quality. English is a compulsory subject for all non-English major students. EFL education for non-English major students consists of two phases: General English (GE) and English for Special Purposes (ESP). GE courses take place in the first five semesters of students' eight-semester tertiary study and account for more than 80 per cent of EFL education at VUni.

In 2015, VUni renewed implementing blended learning in teaching English for students across three faculties. The overall focus of English blended courses (EBCs) at VUni is to develop students' English communicative competence in their daily life and in preparation for working environments. Thus, blended learning in VUni means that learning resources and tasks are online and the face-to-face component is about conversational English. A group of programme leaders and EFL teachers worked together to develop resources and tasks for blended courses. The IT staff in the institution designed the university Learning Management System (LMS) that helped deliver the online component of blended courses. The university LMS is a self-contained webpage with embedded instructional tools that permit teachers to organize academic content and monitor students' online completion. The general description of English blended courses (EBCs) at VUni is summarized in Table 1.1 as below:

Table 1.1. *Overview of EBCs at VUni*

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">10-week blended course</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Online components</td><td>Face-to-face components</td></tr>
<tr><td>Hours</td><td>35</td><td>40</td></tr>
<tr><td>Tools</td><td>The university LMS</td><td>Computer, Projector</td></tr>
<tr><td>Sections</td><td>Grammar
Vocabulary
Listening
Reading
Writing</td><td>Speaking</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Assessment</td><td colspan="2">Continuous assessment</td></tr>
<tr><td>4 online unit tests</td><td>4 face-to-face progress tests</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Face-to-face final test</td></tr>
</table>

Students use the university LMS (see Figure 1.1) for their self-study online. When students sign into their accounts, they can access different links to information such as Trang chủ (Homepage); Hoc kết hợp (Blended learning); Thi trên máy (Computer-based test); Học ngoại khóa (Extra English class); Thời khóa biểu (My calendar); Lớp học (My class) and Cá nhân (Personal Information).

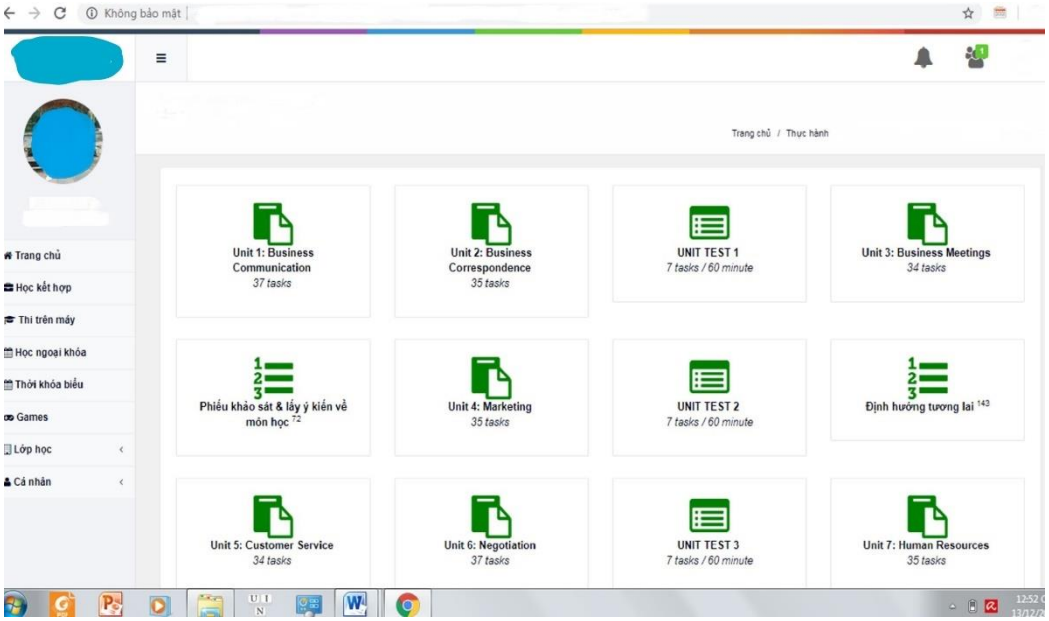


Figure 1.1. Image of the Interface of Online classroom

The LMS includes sections such as PowerPoint presentations on grammar, basic drills for vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening, and writing (see Figure 1.2).

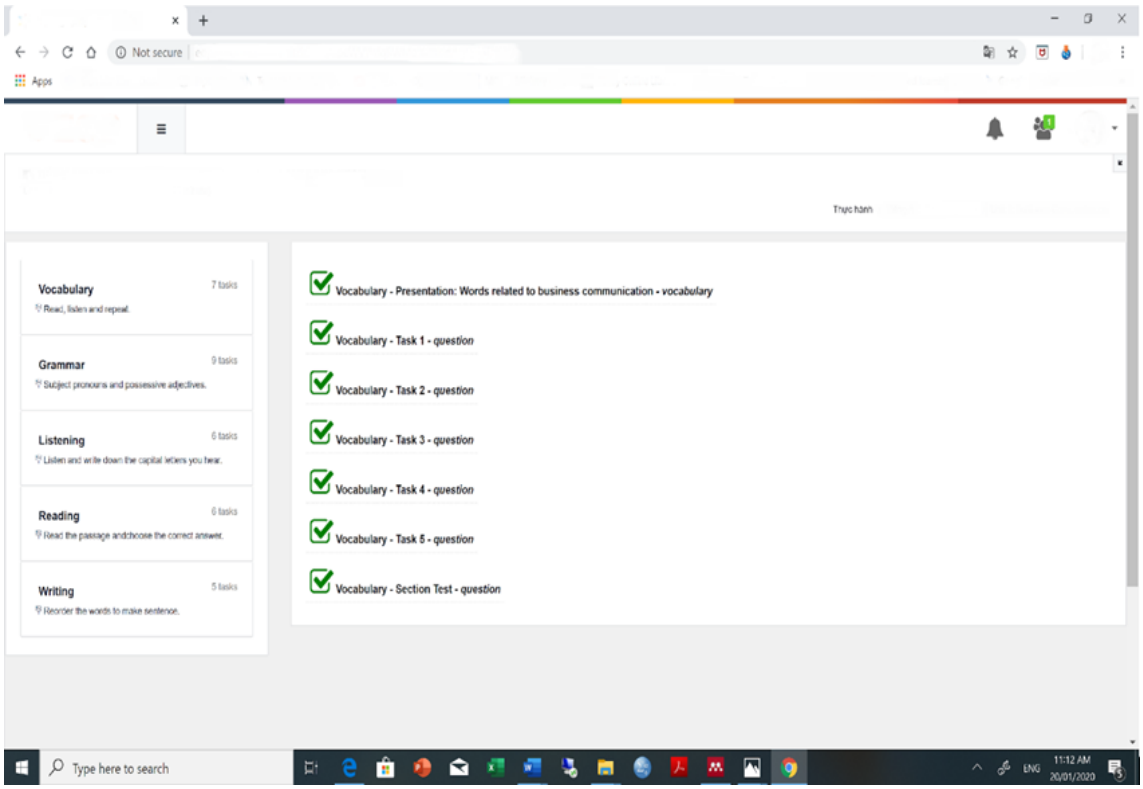


Figure 1.2. Image of tasks for vocabulary section

There are usually between four to seven drilling tasks in each section, plus end-of-section mini tests. Students can access and redo tasks and section-tests as many times as they want throughout the course. Most of the online tasks are accuracy-focused and closed questions, and students will be given automated feedback and scoring. Typical formats of online tasks include activity types such as multiple choice, true-false, matching, fill-in-the-blank and ordering (see Figure 1.3)

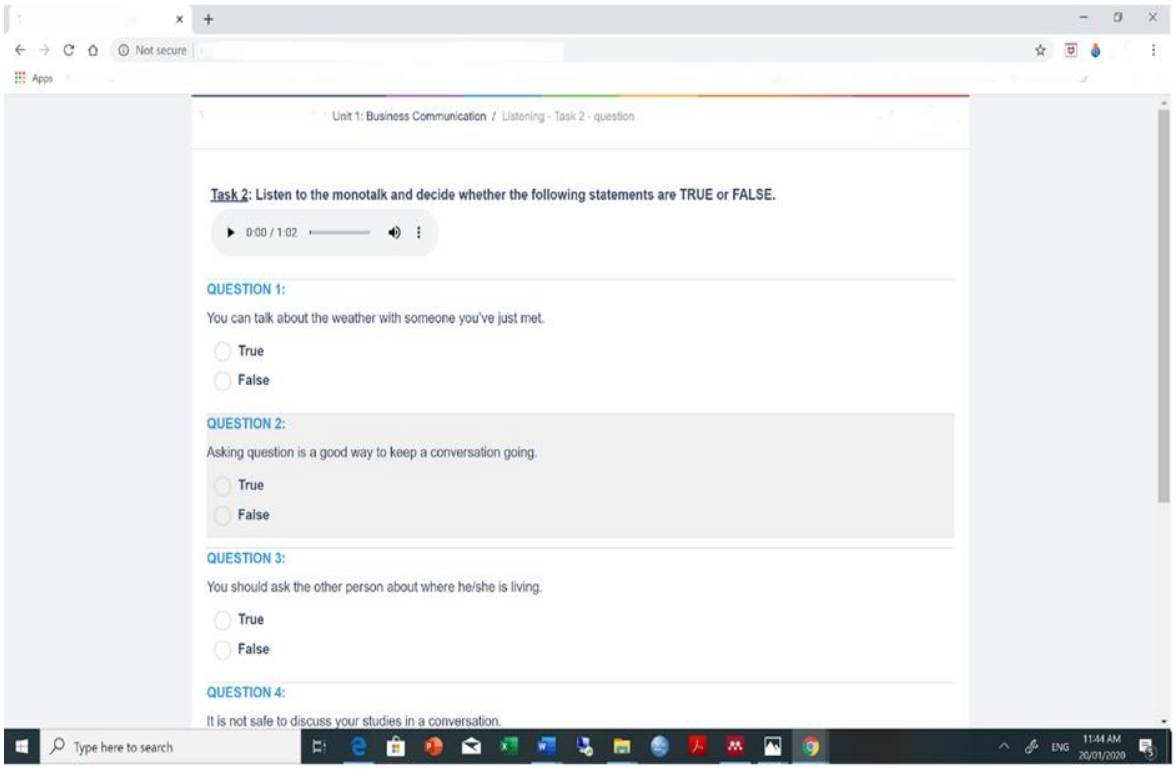


Figure 1.3. Image of an online listening task

At the time of the data collection, there was no online forum within the LMS for students to communicate with teachers or peers about their learning or their course. Students completed online tasks by themselves. If they had any problems about their own online learning, they could raise the inquiries in face-to-face lessons. They could also ask for help from the class peer tutors, who have better English. These class tutors dealt with difficulties in grammar or vocabulary that a student encountered in online learning tasks.

Face-to-face learning focused mainly on developing students' speaking skills over a 10-week period. Each of the 8 units within this period, was composed of two 90-

minute lessons with an average of four tasks per lesson. There were four main parts in a face-to-face unit: (1) Overall learning objectives, (2) Key language knowledge, (3) Online learning checklist, and (4) Face-to-face learning materials. The first part stated the learning goals of the unit while the second part summarized the focal words and grammar/structures presented in online learning tasks. The third part included a checklist for students to mark completed online tasks. The final part consisted of seven or eight tasks on average to help students to improve their speaking skills.

The course syllabus includes the university's English foreign language assessment framework, which consisted of two main components, namely continuous assessment and the final test. Regarding continuous assessment, students were required to complete 4 online unit tests and 4 progress tests. To be eligible for the final examination, they had to participate in at least 80% face-to-face classes. In addition to this, students had to complete 100% of online learning tasks prior to the face-to-face sessions.

The general guideline for testing and assessment was described in one subsection in the course syllabus including five main suggestions. Firstly, the teachers need to state the speaking assessment criteria for each task including message content, vocabulary and grammar range, fluency and coherence, and attitude and comprehensibility. Secondly, the teachers need to ask several individuals or pairs to perform their work in front of the whole class so that the teachers and peers can give feedback. Thirdly, the teachers need to create a comfortable/supportive learning environment to encourage students to do speaking tasks voluntarily. Fourthly, if the in-class time is insufficient, the teachers can ask students to repeat the speaking task at home (individually or in groups), then either video or audio record it for further peer-or teacher feedback in the following class. Finally, the teachers can use their classroom observations and results of progress tests to identify learning areas where they can support students in face-to-face classes.

Both online and face-to-face learning materials were theme-based, and the themes were selected by EFL teachers after a needs analysis with ex-students and the subject content teachers. English teachers interviewed ex-students about particular

situations in which English was used at their workplace. Subject teachers were asked about what subject matters were important for students. After the needs analysis, the themes were then compiled. Accordingly, lexical items and grammar points were selected based on their probability of occurrence in the context of particular themes and situations. Online and face-to-face tasks were designed to help students practise these target lexical and linguistic forms. Listening, reading and writing materials were collected from different sources to provide students with more opportunities to understand linguistic forms in various contexts. Furthermore, the face-to-face tasks were designed to help the students revise, practise, and use these target language items.

Prior to EBCs being implemented, teachers and students attended a workshop that introduced the LMS and activities they were expected to do using it. Teachers and students could access the LMS anytime anywhere with an Internet connection. Students' online completion rate is automatically recorded. Teachers use those online reports to monitor students' online learning and calculate students' attendance and participation.

1.5 Thesis structure

The thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter One above describes my motivation for the study, research objectives and the significance of the study. This chapter also presents the background to the study including information about higher education reform, the integration of ICT in higher education, the context of ELT in Vietnam, and the implementation of blended learning at VUni. Finally, the chapter provides the overview of the structure of this thesis.

Chapter Two reviews the literature that informs this study in four main aspects. Firstly, the chapter broadly examines EFL teaching approaches. Secondly, it focuses on definitions and types of blended learning as well as rationales for adopting blended learning approaches. Thirdly, it examines the relationship between Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and EFL blended learning, underpinning learning theories and pedagogical principles of EFL

blended learning. Finally, the chapter discusses potential benefits of implementing blended learning approaches in EFL as well as critical factors for success.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used for this research. It starts with a discussion about my philosophical stances, and my decision to adopt a mixed methods approach in relation to the research questions. This chapter then reports on the research design together with my choice of Activity Theory as a methodological framework and the research methods. The chapter ends by discussing the role of researcher, ethical considerations and the quality of research,

Chapter Four reports the qualitative findings about programme leaders' and teachers' perspectives regarding different aspects of EBCs through the lens of Activity Theory. Key findings are arranged according to Activity Theory elements.

Chapter Five presents findings about students' perspectives of EBCs from two student data sources: online survey and interview. Key findings of student interviews are also arranged responding to Activity Theory elements.

Chapter Six discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research literature and concludes the study with a discussion of recommendations and limitations of the study, followed by suggestions for future research and personal remarks.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a theoretical background on four main areas. Firstly, the chapter gives a brief overview of key EFL teaching approaches, highlighting how these approaches have been adopted in Vietnam over time. Secondly, the chapter discusses concepts and types of blended learning and drivers behind the adoption of blended learning approaches in higher education institutions. Thirdly, the chapter examines the relationship between Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) blended learning, underlying learning theories and pedagogical principles of EFL blended learning. Lastly, the chapter reviews potential benefits of implementing blended learning approaches in EFL as well as key factors for success.

2.1 Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

The teaching of foreign languages, especially English, is a "vast international enterprise" (Richards & Burns, 2012, p. 1). The term 'foreign languages' is located in relation to the more general term 'second languages'. Second languages (L2) are broadly defined as any languages other than the learner's native language or mother tongue or first language (L1) (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). These second languages include both languages of wider communication encountered within the local region or community (e.g., at the workplace or in the media) and foreign languages, which have no major role in the community and are primarily learnt only in the classroom. Researchers include 'foreign' languages under this more general term of 'second' languages, because they appear to believe that the underlying learning processes are essentially the same for more local and for more remote target languages, despite different learning purposes and circumstances (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Thus, the distinction between second and foreign language learning is best treated as a sociolinguistic one rather than psycholinguistic one (Ellis, 2008). In this study, I used the term EFL as in the Vietnamese context, English is formally and mainly taught in the classroom and has not been used as a means of communication in wider society.

Learning a foreign language such as English requires input and opportunities for fluency and accuracy practice and development. English language teaching methods have shifted over time in response to shifting beliefs around input and practice. The focus originally was on accuracy, and teacher-centric methods such as Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, Reading Method, Structural Method, Audiolingual Method, Situational Method, were prevalent from the 1950s. In response to growing concerns at learners' difficulties with fluency and the production of language, there was a shift towards greater fluency with the Communicative Language Teaching approach. However, there is no one single best English teaching method, which fits all contexts sociocultural and individual learner differences, learners' English proficiency and their learning styles preferences (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Thus, it is valuable that teachers are familiar with a range of English teaching methods to select the most relevant to their contexts. The following section reviews English teaching methodologies, which have been popular in the Vietnamese context.

The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) has its origin in the formal teaching of Latin and Greek. This method emphasizes the learning of explicit grammar rules and vocabulary items. Learners then use the linguistic and lexical knowledge to translate sentences from the first language to the second language and vice versa. Reading and writing are seen as more important than speaking and listening. GTM also focuses on accuracy which helps students pass required written examinations (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). GTM has been seen to be ineffective in developing learners' communicative ability, and students taught with the GTM have been criticized as having limited oral expressive ability and for relying too much on translating everything into their mother language. GTM has been the main method used to teach English in Vietnam for a long time, and relies very much on a teacher-centred classroom.

The Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), developed in the 1960s, drew on the behaviourist principles of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The ALM focuses primarily on speaking and listening and language learning is viewed as a process of repetition, imitation and habit formation, in which good habits are

formed by giving correct responses rather than by making mistakes. This method requires learners to engage in mechanical and repetition drills to imitate and repeat numerous sentences and language patterns. Despite its aim to improve learners' communicative competence, the use of extensive mimicry, memorization and over-learning of language patterns appears to have led to learners' boredom and dissatisfaction and resulted in students' repetition of the drills without understanding them (Richard & Rodger, 2014). The ALM was introduced in Vietnam in the 1990s but was found to be resource intensive and therefore out of reach to some schools.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been one of the most common and popular teaching approaches in EFL contexts. CLT appeared to address concerns about traditional grammar instruction, where learners had considerable grammatical knowledge but limited ability to use the target language in authentic communication. Since the 1980s, many language teachers have adopted CLT (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1983), which emphasizes the development of communicative competence. Hymes (1971) coined the term *communicative competence*, which implies that speakers need to know what to say as well as when to say it and how to say it. Communicative competence involves the ability to use language for communicative purposes in different social contexts, to understand and produce language in different forms, and to communicate even with a limited knowledge of the language (Littlewood, 2007; Richards, 2005).

Although the goal of CLT was to develop students' communicative competence, researchers have noted that CLT has not succeeded in its intended goal, especially in many EFL settings, because this CLT approach overlooked the contextual factors in which language teaching occurs (Bax, 2003; Humphries & Burns, 2015). EFL contexts, where students are learning English in a country where English is not the predominant language, provide few opportunities for students to use English outside of class time. In a CLT classroom in an EFL context, much class time may be used ineffectively by instructors (who themselves are often second language speakers) who adopt a teacher-centric pedagogy often via lecturing while students sit silently and passively listen (Lee, 2009). As a consequence,

students may receive insufficient "input, output, and interaction, particularly given the time constraints of a language class" (Spino & Trego, 2015).

CLT was first implemented in Vietnam in the early 1990s and has been widely advocated in Vietnam particularly, as the main goal of National Foreign Languages Project 2020 (NFLP 2020) in Vietnam was to enhance students' communicative competence (Vietnamese Government, 2008). To achieve this goal, many changes have been implemented including designing and redesigning English language curriculum based on CLT tenets such as a focus on communicative activities, setting English language proficiency benchmarks for teachers and students, and training and retraining teachers (see section 1.4.3). However, research in Vietnam indicates that the CLT method has not been implemented effectively and students have few opportunities to use English outside of their English classes (Le, 2015, 2019; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2015).

Blended learning has the potential to enable teachers to provide students with rich, authentic target language input and self-paced learning opportunities as well as facilitate students' active and collaborative learning (Joosten et al., 2013; King, 2016; Marsh, 2012). Given such potential, blended learning perhaps can address one of the major challenges of language instruction, which is the substantial amount of time and exposure needed to acquire another language, in this case, English. Hence, I wonder whether or not the blended learning approach applied in teaching English in my study context might enhance or constrain students' English learning.

The next section will provide an overview of blended learning in relation to establishing a definition, types of blended learning and the drivers for adopting blended learning approaches.

2.2 Blended learning

2.2.1 Definitions of blended learning

The term *blended learning* has been widely used in educational settings, but its definition is still a debate amongst scholars (Chew, 2009; Graham, 2006, 2013;

Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, & Francis, 2006). According to Graham (2013), the central issues in defining blended learning concern what content, modalities, methods or practices would be blended, whether "seat time" (p.333) is relevant, or the amount of online versus face-to-face teaching, and lastly, what quality factors need to be included as part of a definition.

Sharpe et al. (2006) identified eight dimensions on which blending may occur. These dimensions include: learning modes (online or face-to-face), pedagogical approaches; technological applications; teaching and learning places (work-based vs. classroom-based); learning directions (instructor-directed or learned-directed); learning time (synchronous or asynchronous communications); types of learners (practitioners vs. students); and learning focus (acknowledging different aims). Diverse meanings of blended learning discussed by Sharpe et al. (2006) were criticized as broad and complex since any kind of teaching and learning can be defined as blended learning (Graham, 2006), and some dimensions are overlapping and confusing (Chew, 2009).

The debate about the definition of blended learning is also associated with how institutions operationalize the clear distinction between traditional face-to-face courses and blended learning courses. When traditional classrooms increase the use of ICT, the difference between face-to-face classes and blended classes is hard to identify if based solely on technology use (Graham, 2013). Several researchers are concerned that the definition of blended learning should go beyond using technology as an add-on to teach difficult concepts or adding supplementary information. Hence, other definitions of blended learning include a reduction in face-to-face seat time (Laster, Otte, Picciano, & Sorg, 2005; Picciano, 2009; Vaughan, 2007). For example, Laster et al. (2005) defined blended classes as those where an online component replaces a portion of face-to-face time.

Dealing with the issue as to whether reduced seat time should be part of the definition (Graham, 2013), several researchers identify boundaries between blended learning and other modalities based on the distribution of time via any delivery mode. Allen and Seaman (2007) suggest that there is a continuum

between no online component and fully online delivery. Blended models sit somewhere in the middle. Gruba and Hinkleman (2012) set a threshold of less than 45% online delivery of content for a mode to be considered blended.

The next issue related to definitions of blended learning is whether pedagogical quality should be mentioned in the definition (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Graham, 2013; Picciano, 2009). Authors who wish to view blended learning as a tool for transformational change advocate the inclusion of quality in the definition of blended learning (Graham, 2013). For example, all participants at the Sloan-C Consortium blended workshops at University of Illinois-Chicago in 2005 agreed with the blended learning definition proposed by Laster et.al (2005). Laster et.al (2005) had defined blended courses as having online and face-to-face components being integrated pedagogically. Similarly, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) define blended learning as "the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches" (p.148).

Unlike the definitions of blended learning in higher education discussed above, defining language learning in blended contexts tends to ignore the communicative nature of acquiring and becoming proficient in another language. For example, Neumeier (2005) describes blended language learning as being "a combination of face-to-face and computer assisted learning in a single teaching and learning environment" (p.164). Similarly, Stracke (2007) defines blended language learning in her study as "a particular learning and teaching environment that combines face-to-face and computer assisted language learning" (p.57). Other scholars avoid using the term 'computer assisted learning' and use 'technology' as a substitute in their definitions of blended learning. Particularly, Bañados (2006) refers to blended language learning as the combination of technology and classroom instruction in a flexible approach. In a similar vein, Sharma and Barrett (2008) describe blended language learning as a language course which combines a face-to-face classroom component with an appropriate use of technology. More recently, blended learning in language education has been defined as "combined classroom and online instruction" (H. M. Anderson, 2018, p. 3). Helms (2014) also uses 'blended' to describe courses that combine face-to-face and some type

of synchronous or asynchronous online teaching that goes beyond providing passive links to resources.

Up to now, there has been no universally accepted definition of the term *blended learning*. The range of definitions of blended learning, some of which have been described earlier, allows course designers and teachers to adapt, use or conceptualize the blended learning term to fit to their implementation contexts. Thus, I use the *blended learning* definition proposed by Laster et al. (2005), cited in Picciano (2009, p.10) because this definition emphasizes the importance of pedagogy and allows for a variety of blending systems.

1. Courses that integrate online with traditional face-to-face class activities in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner; and

2. Where a portion (institutionally defined) of face-to-face time is replaced by online activity.

2.2.2 Types of blended learning

There are many types of blended learning systems. Graham (2006) categorised blended learning according to the levels of implementation as *Activity level, Course level, Programme level, and Institutional level* (see Table 2.1), and across all four levels, the nature of the blend is either determined by the learner or the instructor. Course level blending is considered as "one of the most common ways to blend" (Graham, 2006, p.76), and this is how blending has occurred within my study.

Table 2.1. *Blended learning levels*

Blended learning levels	Descriptions
Activity Level Blending	Blending at the activity level occurs when a learning activity combines both face-to-face and computer-mediated instructions.
Course Level Blending	A course level blending comprises the incorporation of both distinct face-to-face and computer-mediated activities used as part of a course.
Program Level Blending	Blending at a programme level often entails a model in which the participants choose a mixture between face-to-face courses and online courses, or a model in which the combination between face-to-face courses and online courses is required by the programme.
Institutional Level Blending	Some institutions of higher education are creating models for blending at an institutional level, in which students have face-to-face classes at the beginning and end of the course, with online activities in between.

In terms of what is being achieved through blending, Graham (2006) classified blended learning into *Enabling blends*, *Enhancing blends*, and *Transforming blends* (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2. *Different categories of Blended learning systems*

Blended learning systems	Descriptions
Enabling blends	Primarily focus on addressing issues of access and convenience. For example, blends that are intended to provide additional flexibility to the learners or blends that attempt to provide the same opportunities or learning experience but through a different modality.
Enhancing blends	Allow incremental changes to the pedagogy but do not radically change the way teaching and learning occurs. This can occur at both ends of the spectrum. For example, in a traditional face-to-face learning environment, additional resources and perhaps some supplementary materials may be included online.
Transforming blends	Blends that allow for a radical transformation of the pedagogy. For example, a change from a model where learners are just receivers of information to a model where learners actively construct knowledge through dynamic interactions. These types of blends enable intellectual activity that was not practically possible without the technology.

(Source: reprinted from Graham, 2006, p.79-80)

Enabling blends do not encourage the change of pedagogy and are regarded as a supplementary option for on-campus students (Lindquist, 2006) while both *Enhancing blends* and *Transforming blends* require changes to pedagogy. The

blended learning model for English teaching in my study context consists of online and face-to-face components, where the online component is for the input and development of vocabulary and grammar knowledge and language skills, and the face-to-face component is to reinforce these knowledge and skills. That means students are expected to study online and then bring their learning and knowledge to the class and get involved in interactive and communicative pair work and group work in face-to-face lessons. A blend such as this may be considered as an *Enhancing blend.*

Although an *Enhancing Blend* is considered as the most common practice of blended learning in traditional university settings (Graham, 2006; Sharpe et al., 2006) such as my university, it is still advisable that blended learning should be applied according to *Transforming blends* to attain its potential benefits (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Additionally, the blended learning design should consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of both online and face-to-face modes to "create new, more effective learning experiences for learners" (Stein & Graham, 2020, p. 9).

Since blended learning is a new teaching mode in Vietnam (Bouilheres et al., 2020), the implementation of a blended learning approach may be influenced by a range of contextual factors including instructors, students and the institution. Thus, this research aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of programme leaders, teachers and students regarding the adoption of a blended learning approach in teaching English in a Vietnamese university.

2.2.3 Drivers for adopting blended learning approaches

The adoption of blended learning solutions in education has increased over some years. In 2011, scholars were beginning to note an "explosive growth of blended learning" in higher education in many countries (Norberg, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2011, p. 6). With the growing enrolments in either online or blended courses in higher education in many countries, it is helpful to explore the drivers for that trend.

According to Graham, Allen, and Ure (2005), blended learning is primarily adopted in higher education for three major reasons: (1) improved pedagogy, (2) increased access and flexibility, and (3) increased cost-effectiveness and resource use. Firstly, blended learning may provide pedagogical benefits, which help increase learning outcomes and student satisfaction (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham, 2013). For example, Means, Toyama, Murphy, and Baki (2013) conducted a meta-analysis on empirical studies comparing students' learning outcomes for either fully online or blended instruction with those of fully face-to-face instruction. Their findings revealed that students in blended learning courses achieve, on average, a higher success rate than those in fully online or traditional face-to-face classes (Means et al., 2013).

The University of Florida conducted a longitudinal study on the impact of online and blended courses on the success rates of students since the beginning of online and blended courses in 1996. Data were collected and compared across multiple semesters and academic years. Their findings showed that the success rates of students (defined as C grade or above) for blended courses are higher than either fully face-to-face or fully online courses (Dziuban, Graham, Moskal, Norberg, & Sicilia, 2018). In my study context, the blended learning approach in English teaching was adopted in order to improve students' English knowledge and skills. Thus, my study explores how a Vietnamese university implements blended learning in EFL education.

Secondly, the demand for greater accessibility and flexibility has driven the growth of blended learning all over the world. By reducing some of the required face-to-face class sessions, blended courses offer greater flexibility compared to traditional courses (Stein & Graham, 2020). Moreover, the use of online and digital activities can provide flexibility to students. Digital videos of lectures allow students to manage the speed and repetition of content (Stein & Graham, 2020). Oh and Park (2009) surveyed 133 faculty members and 33 staff of the Center for Teaching and Learning from 151 universities in South Korea to examine faculty involvement in blended instruction and faculty attitudes towards the instructional methods. The study shows that blended learning is common in most of the

universities surveyed, and more than 50% of the participating universities had wanted to increase students' accessibility and flexibility to their programmes by offering blended courses. Most faculty members had positive attitudes towards blended learning as they believed blended learning helped improve the quality of instruction and overcame some of the limitations associated with fully online instruction.

More recently, other empirical studies have revealed that many students favour the flexibility of blended learning. Pardede (2019) investigated the perceptions of 32 Indonesian EFL students regarding blended learning environments. Pardede's findings suggested that students generally responded positively to blended learning environments. Of particular note, students appreciated the ease and flexibility of accessing learning materials in their online platform, so they could regulate their own study. Similarly, Bouilheres et al. (2020) explored students' perceptions and experiences of blended courses offered offshore by an Australian university within Vietnam. Their findings suggest that students valued the flexibility and convenience of blended learning because they could study anywhere, at any time, and at their own pace.

Thirdly, economic goals such as cost effectiveness and resource use are driving higher education institutions toward adopting blended learning approaches (Graham, 2013; Graham & Allen, 2009; Graham, Woodfield, & Harrison, 2013). Blended learning facilitates enrolment growth and enhances use of physical facilities by moving some face-to-face teaching online, and promotes student retention, thus improving time to degree (King, 2016; Niemiec & Otte, 2010). When institutions create blended learning options, they can expand the reach of their programmes to a wider population of learners. Institutions often anticipate that this shift results in lower costs related to physical spaces, equipment and services, printing and wages for teachers. Students and teachers also save money on transport. For example, the University of Central Florida has reduced costs due to improved scheduling efficiency and reduced the need for physical spaces and their associated costs (Dziuban, Hartman, Cavanagh, & Moskal, 2011). While cost-effectiveness is one of reasons institutions decide to adopt the blended

learning approach, this has not been a focus of my study.

In summary, drivers behind the implementation of blended learning in higher education can result from the potential advantages of blended learning in terms of learner outcomes and satisfaction, flexibility and cost-effectiveness. Thus, exploring and understanding the rationales for the implementation of EFL blended learning in my study context is valuable because it helps to identify what may make English blended programmes successful in an EFL higher education context in a developing country.

The following section presents literature on blended learning in EFL education, beginning with a discussion of similarities and differences of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and EFL blended learning.

2.3 Blended learning in EFL education

2.3.1 Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and EFL blended learning

EFL blended learning is acknowledged as "as a sub-discipline of CALL" (Gruba & Hinkleman, 2012, p. 13) because both CALL and blended language learning share some similarities such as using computer and digital technologies. However, there are also significant differences between CALL and EFL blended learning. Thus, it is important to explore both similarities and differences between CALL and blended language learning to consider what might be a way to establish effective implementation of blended learning in EFL contexts.

The explosion of interest in using computers for language teaching led to the field of CALL. CALL is defined by Levy (1997) as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning" (p.1). CALL has embraced a wide range of software applications including specific software (designed to facilitate language learning, such as CD-ROMs); generic software (designed for general purposes, such as Word, PowerPoint), web-based learning programs (online dictionaries, blog, wiki); and computer-mediated

communication programs (online chat, email, discussion forum) (Davies, Hewer, & Walker, 2004).

In Vietnam, there have been a wide range of studies that explore the use of CALL applications in EFL contexts. T. T. L. Nguyen (2019), N. G. Tran and Nguyen (2014), H. A. Pham (2014) and K. N. T. Bui (2012) examined how EFL learners and teachers perceived and experienced the use of Web 2.0 tools in English language teaching. Particularly, T. T. L. Nguyen (2019) shows that Facebook and Google docs have the scope to foster collaborative writing. Moreover, T. T. L. Nguyen (2019) indicates that successful integration of ICT in language teaching requires teachers and students' readiness to engage with technology and the pedagogical purposes to use that technology.

N. G. Tran and Nguyen (2014) integrated the website *Edmodo.com* into their traditional class to teach two subjects: *English speaking skills* and *English language teaching methodology* for students of English majors at a university. Their findings show that teachers used *Edmodo* to organize students' assignments and facilitate online discussion. H. A. Pham (2014) examined how the Web 2.0 learning environments (wikis and blogs) shape EFL teachers' teaching practices and their identities, finding that such innovation in teaching methods resulted in better student engagement. Similarly, K. N. T. Bui's (2012) study shows that the use of free Web 2.0 tools (Skype, Dropbox or YouTube) enhanced the student's involvement in the learning process as well as their language skills.

According to Beatty (2013), the use of computers in the field of EFL education has been informed by learning theories and innovations in educational technologies. Thus, researchers have linked the development of CALL to different language learning theories and approaches to language teaching (Kern & Warschauer, 2000; Warschauer, 2004). Yim and Warschauer (2016) and Hockly (2016) summarize three developmental stages of CALL including: Structural/Behaviouristic CALL; Communicative CALL, and Integrative CALL. Understanding the development of CALL helps identify the similarities and differences between CALL and EFL blended learning, and to ensure a good

practice of EFL blended learning. Hence, each of the developmental stages of CALL is explained next.

In stage 1, Structural/Behaviouristic CALL organized language learning according to behaviouristic learning principles of repetition and habit formation in the learning process (Warschauer, 1996). The main focus of Structural/Behaviouristic CALL was using grammar-translation and audiolingual methods to teach a language (Yim & Warschauer, 2016). Thus, computer-based language learning activities in this stage consisted of "basic interactions and decontextualized exercises between the learner and computer, with minimal and unsophisticated automatic feedback given to the learner by the machine" (Hockly, 2016, p. 17). The purposes of the computer programs were to provide language learners with grammar and vocabulary tutorials, drills and other practice activities with a focus on accuracy (Butler-Pascoe, 2011; Hockly, 2016). Several behavioural CALL applications such as electronic practice and drill exercises for revision or grammar checker have been used in the Vietnamese EFL context to help enhance EFL teaching practice (Peeraer & Van Petegem, 2012).

In stage 2, Communicative CALL was developed under the influence of a cognitive view of language learning, that is, "language as an internal mental system developed through interaction" (Yim & Warschauer, 2016, p. 593). The aim of Communicative CALL is to enhance language learners' fluency by providing language learners with more complex communicative exercises through language input and analytic/inferential tasks (Yim & Warschauer, 2016). The CALL software in this stage, such as multimedia, simulation, self-paced reading, text reconstruction and language games, incorporated a wider range of student choice, control and interaction compared to the drill and practice programs (Warschauer, 1996). Some Communicative CALL applications such as language games software have been often used in teaching English grammars in Vietnam (Luu & Nguyen, 2010).

In stage 3, Integrative CALL was designed according to principles of the socio-cognitive approach, which viewed language as a process of apprenticeship or socialization into particular discourse communities (Gee, 2015). The main focus

of Integrative CALL was to create meaningful interaction in authentic discourse communities (Kern & Warschauer, 2000). Learners are able to communicate not just with machines but with each other and collaborate in learning via the computer and social media. Communication and collaboration can be facilitated by using Internet-connected computers (Fotos & Browne, 2004). This means that computers with an internet connection are used as mediational tools to provide language learners with inputs, authentic environments and opportunities for meaningful interactions to help promote their learning (Woo & Reeves, 2007). In some Vietnamese EFL education, social media tools (Facebook or Google Docs) have been integrated into EFL instruction to provide students with authentic and purposeful learning of language skills, as well as enhance collaborative learning.

Integrative CALL and EFL blended learning have some common features. For example, like the integrative CALL, the blended learning mode uses computer and web-based technologies to provide EFL learners with: a variety of sources of authentic language learning materials (Fethi & Marshall, 2018; Gruba & Hinkleman, 2012; Gulnaz, Althomali, & Alzeer, 2020; King, 2016); increased interactions with teachers and peers (Gulnaz et al., 2020; King, 2016; M. Liu, 2013; Miyazoe, 2008; Stein & Graham, 2020); and more opportunities to use English for communicative purposes (Pop & Slev, 2012).

However, blended learning modes have some different features compared to CALL. While CALL is generally described as a set of tools designed to promote language learning (Beatty, 2013), BL is generally referred to as "offering an 'ideal site' for innovative pedagogy" (Riley et al., 2014, p. 61). Thus, the most important aspect of blended learning is the pedagogy to "increase **active learning**, develop an **engaged learning community**, and **promote learner autonomy**" (Stein & Graham, 2020, p. 11, author's emphasis).

It appears that CALL can be used without significant changes in pedagogy and curriculum in face-to-face classes. Meanwhile, implementing blended learning in EFL education implies significant changes in existing pedagogy and curriculum (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; N. T. Hoang, 2015; Joosten et al., 2013; Riley et al., 2014; Stein & Graham, 2020; Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013).

Hence, learning theories underpinning EFL blended learning and pedagogical principles for implementing blended learning are discussed in the next two sections.

2.3.2 Learning theories underpinning EFL blended learning

According to Torrao and Tiirmaa-Oras (2007), "the theory of blended learning does not seem to 'belong' to one learning theory but is rather a method used within different pedagogical approaches" (p. 11). Thus, combining online learning and face-to-face learning in a blended environment involves understanding the learning theories of the two different environments (Alebaikan, 2010). Three most influential learning theories in educational psychology, behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism, not only underpin face-to-face instruction but also apply to the design of online learning materials (Ally, 2008). Each of these learning theories will be discussed in relation to the design of blended/online language learning materials and pedagogy as follows.

2.3.2.1 Behaviourism

Behaviourism is based on the view that learning, including second language learning, is a process in which specific behaviours are acquired when responding to specific stimuli. In other words, behaviourists mainly focus on the observable changes in learners' behaviours and ignore mental processes. Behaviourists see human beings as being exposed to a range of stimuli in their environment. The correct response people give to each stimulus is reinforced and increases the chance of behaviour becoming learned. Thus, repetition and reinforcement underpin behaviourism (Skinner, 1957). Behaviouristic strategies of drill and reinforcement seem to occur in many online language learning programs such as online spelling or grammar programs (Hartsell, 2006), which present learners with a problem to answer and then reward them with congratulatory messages, lights, or bells (Warschauer, 1996). These online programs only help learners to practice the same skill repeatedly (Mayer, 2003) without teaching them new concepts (Gedera, 2014).

Online tutorials tend to also rely on behaviourist principles. They help learners to improve their proficiency levels (Gedera, 2014). However, Gedera (2014) argues that although both drill and skill software and online tutorials assist students in learning basic skills, "students may not necessarily understand what they are learning" (p. 54). This means that as the learner role tends to be passive, learners may not be able to apply what they have learnt in new or unfamiliar situations (Mayer, 2003).

2.3.2.2 Cognitivism

Cognitivism arose out of the recognition of limitations of behaviourism - the focus on drill and skill rather than mental processing. Cognitivism emphasizes the processes behind learners' behaviours.

Cognitive theory emphasizes learning as an internal process of the human mind involving memory, thinking, reflection, abstraction, and metacognition (Ally, 2008). Mental processes (thinking, memory, problem solving) are described as schema, the active organization of past experiences (R. C. Anderson & Pearson, 2002) that can be modified to accommodate new mental information. These intellectual processes are similar to the 'information processes' of computers. Both involve gaining information, storing information, retrieving information and making decisions (Schunk, 2012). Along the way, learners develop appropriate metacognitive skills such as self-planning, self-regulation, and summarization (Bonk & Khoo, 2014). Second language learning, from cognitive perspectives, is viewed as "the acquisition of a complex cognitive skill" (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 113). This means that to learn a second language is to learn a skill including component sub-skills. This learning process requires automatization (where sub-skills are practiced and routinized) and restructuring (where sub-skills are constantly modified) by the learner. Learners become active participants in the learning process. Cognitive processes have found their way into online language learning through the application of simulation, mind mapping and problem-solving software programs, which help learners develop their cognitive skills (Hartsell, 2006).

Although cognitivism has practical implications in terms of helping explore the mental processes of learners, it was criticized for several limitations. Firstly, the cognitive approach stressed the importance of information processing rather than knowledge and construction of knowledge (Mayer, 2003). Secondly, the cognitive learning approach focused on human beings in artificial settings (such as relying on lab experiments to understand cognitive processes of the human mind) rather than on natural academic settings (Mayer, 2003). This view ignored other factors that might affect the learning process such as motivation, culture, and biological aspects (Mayer, 2003). Since cognitivism tended to ignore affective, social and biological factors of learning, a new theory emerged to explain learning: constructivism.

2.3.2.3 Constructivism

Constructivism is "an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learners" (Elliott, Kratochwill, Littlefield, & Travers, 2000, p. 256). In constructivism, people produce knowledge by interpreting information as filtered through social interactions (P. Benson, 2001). Effective learning, from a constructivist perspective, is not a passive process of simply receiving information. Rather, it involves learners' active decision-making about the content and processes of their learning (Lech & Harris, 2019). There are two main types of constructivist theories. The theories of Jean Piaget (1954) and Lev Vygotsky (1978) are described next, with emphasis on those aspects related to language learning.

Cognitive constructivism

Cognitive constructivism is based on the work of Jean Piaget (1954). The central idea of cognitive constructivism focuses on the cognitive process that people use to make sense of the world. This approach emphasizes that learners actively construct knowledge by forming their own representations of the material to be learned, selecting information they perceive to be relevant, and interpret this based on their present knowledge and needs. According to Piaget, when learners

encounter a new experience, they will firstly fit the new experience into their existing cognitive schema, which is called assimilation. Because of this new experience, the learners then will revise the existing schema (change, enlarge, or make it more sophisticated), which is called accommodation. It is from these two complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation that a learner's cognitive development or learning occurs. Thus, learning, from Piaget's view, is an active, rather than a passive process.

Piaget's cognitivist constructivism theory has had implications for EFL teaching. For example, EFL teachers should evaluate the developmental levels of students prior to planning lessons. Teachers also need to know about students' learning needs and preferences so that they can guide and help students assimilate new information and adopt new information to modify their existing intellectual framework. Additionally, EFL teachers need to create rich environments that enable students to be involved in active exploration and hands-on activities. This arrangement facilitates active construction of knowledge. Blended learning can support cognitive constructivism by providing learners with access to rich language input from a range of authentic sources and with different modes (texts, sounds and image) (Woo & Reeves, 2007) through online means such as an LMS. Other online learning tools such as self-check questions and exercises with automatic feedback enable students to develop their metacognitive strategies such as self-monitoring and self-evaluating (Vaughan et al., 2013; Woo & Reeves, 2007).

However, critics argue that cognitive constructivism ignores social interactions and the collaborative nature of learning (Barker, 2008). Other concerns include that the Piagetian concept of constructivism overlooks important contextual factors in learning environments such as social and meaningful interaction, available educational resources, whether media are integrated into learning environments, learners' preferences, and the affordance of individual student thinking (Ackermann, 2001). Consequently, a variation of constructivism, known as social constructivism, focused on the social and collaborative aspects of learning.

Social constructivism (also known as Social cultural theory)

Social Cultural Theory (SCT) was initially proposed by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978). This theory views learning as a process of social interactions in which learners use the tools of their culture such as language, diagrams and common ways of investigating phenomena to develop shared understandings. In the light of SCT, language learning is intimately connected with cultural and social events. Language is considered a cultural artefact that mediates thinking and communication between people and within an individual (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Key principles of SCT relevant to my study are mediation, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and scaffolding.

Vygotsky (1978) notes that human beings generally do not act directly on the physical environment around them but use tools and labour activity to change their surroundings. The interaction of the human mind with the environment is mediated by psychological tools (number, music, arts, and, above all, language) or physical tools (material, labour, and tools) that generates higher mental capacities such as logical thought, problem-solving, and learning (Lantolf, 2000). Over time, these artefacts are transformed to regulate humans' connection to the world, to others in the community, and to themselves. The development of human cognition is socially and culturally shaped (Cole & Wertsch, 1996; Rogoff, 1990). This means that human mental activity cannot be separated from the society and culture in which it develops (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). Thus, language learning, as a higher form of human mental activity, is a culturally and socially mediated process.

The process of language learning follows the pattern of being regulated by artefacts (textbooks, authentic materials, classroom tasks), regulated by interactions with others (teachers, peers or native speakers), and by being self-regulated through private speech (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). The notion of mediation strongly supports the use of digital technologies in online/blended language courses. In an online/blended learning environment, students' English learning activity can be mediated by online learning tools (artefacts). For example, the use of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools (emails, online

chat, discussion forums) can mediate students' English learning activities to assist with the collaborative and social characteristics of blended language learning, and/or enhance student-teacher, student-student authentic interaction outside designated class time.

Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the gap between what we can learn alone and what we can learn through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers, identifies a key component of learning. Vygotsky argues that teaching should address students' ZPD, since it is the connection between what a student already knows and can do, and what is still to learn or do. Once students are comfortable with a known starting place, the learning challenge has a greater likelihood of succeeding. Therefore, the role of teachers is to assist learners to construct meaning and to regulate their own learning through guidance and support. This means that in blended learning environments, teachers are acting as facilitators rather than knowledge transmitters.

Scaffolding is a related concept of ZPD, which is considered as the support mechanism designed to help learners to complete a task within their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, teachers or more competent peers can help less competent students to perform a task that they are unable to perform independently. As less able students can complete tasks independently without support from teachers and peers, the scaffolded learning support will be gradually removed. Hence, scaffolding reduces the difficulty of complex learning and at the same time, helps students focus on constructing knowledge and developing higher-order functions such as critical thinking (Way & Rowe, 2008). Scaffolding in blended courses refers to not only the support provided by various digital technologies and resources, but also teachers' facilitation strategies and lesson design structures. In particular, chat rooms and discussion forums can enhance teachers' understanding of individual student's learning needs and provide scaffolds to students in the learning process. Moreover, as teachers incorporate more technological learning tools such as LMS, learners can easily access educational resources when needed.

Overall, it is apparent that all three learning theories (Behaviourism, Cognitivism and Constructivism) have influenced the instructional design of both face-to-face and online learning environments. Given that language acquisition is a complex process, which can be affected by different factors such as one's prior knowledge as well as cultural and social aspects, there might be therefore no single best approach for designing English language blended courses. Hence, what course designers and teachers may need to take into consideration while designing and facilitating blended language learning approaches includes:

- Understanding principles of different second language learning theories to facilitate appropriate matches between learners, content and instructional design strategies.
- Selecting appropriate instructional strategies from different theoretical perspectives, depending on the requirements of the task and on the level of cognitive processing required.

2.3.3 Pedagogical principles for implementing EFL blended learning

Blended learning, if well designed and implemented, has the potential to support deep and meaningful learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), as well as promote active, student-centred, collaborative learning (L. Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2015; Powell et al., 2015; Stein & Graham, 2020). McCarthy (2016) states that an effective blended language programme should apply principles that constitute best practice in language learning and teaching in general.

2.3.3.1 Principles of good practice in blended learning

Regarding good practice in blended learning environments, many educators have used Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education as guidelines for blended course design and delivery. Their review suggests that good teaching practices are likely to feature teachers undertaking the following:

- Encouraging contact between students and faculty: frequent student-faculty contact in and out of the classroom increases student motivation and involvement
- Developing reciprocity and cooperation among students: good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social; this often increases involvement in learning
- Using active learning techniques: students learn by becoming involved in the environment rather than simply listening
- Giving prompt feedback: frequent feedback on student performance allows students to assess themselves and corrects their performance
- Emphasizing time on task: allocating realistic amounts of time facilitates effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty
- Communicating high expectations: encouraging high expectations is critical for helping students to expect more from their efforts.
- Respecting diverse talents and ways of learning: students need different types of opportunities to show their talents to learn in ways that work for them.

These seven principles appear to apply to both face-to-face learning and online learning approaches, as shown in a range of research projects, such as Babb, Stewart, and Johnson (2010), and Partridge, Ponting, and McCay (2011). Sowan and Jenkins (2013) noted that the quality of blended courses can be improved by applying the seven principles to course design and delivery. Also, Crews, Wilkinson, and Neill (2015) applied the seven principles to online course design to examine whether they would enhance students' success in an online course. They conducted a survey to explore strategies and skills that students perceived as being important for them to complete an online course. Their findings indicated that what students perceived as important strategies reflected the seven principles. Implications from Crews et al.'s (2015) study suggest that online course designs that embed the seven principles are likely to link to student success. Thus, the pedagogical principles for implementing a blended learning approach in the

Vietnamese context should align closely with the seven principles of good practice in face-to-face classes. It will be useful to note the extent to which my study's blended learning courses have such alignment.

There are some misgivings about these principles. For example, Vaughan et al. (2013) argue that the seven principles "do not adequately consider the collaborative constructivist approaches and communication technologies being adopted in higher education" (p.15). Vaughan et al. (2013) therefore created a new set of principles that emphasized how teachers can better engage learners in purposeful collaboration to resolve an issue, solve a problem, or create new understandings. Their set of principles were based on the Community of Inquiry theoretical framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999), which stresses that collaborative constructivist educational experience is realized in the convergence of social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence (Vaughan et al., 2013). Social presence is the degree to which participants feel connected to each other in an online environment, whether fully online or blended (Garrison, 2011). Using chat and/or video can facilitate social presence in blended courses. These tools offer opportunities for students to interact and be spontaneous. This enhances both peer-to-peer and peer-to-tutor connections (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002). Social presence creates "the environment for trust, open communication, and group cohesion" (Vaughan et al., 2013, p. 11).

Cognitive presence refers to the extent to which students engage in activities that practise critical thinking and knowledge construction. Four phases of practical inquiry facilitate this: a triggering event (where an issue emerged from experience is identified for further inquiry); exploration (where students explore the issue individually or cooperatively through brainstorming, questioning, and sharing ideas and information); integration (where learners construct meaning from the ideas generated during the exploration phase) and resolution (where learners apply the knowledge gained to educational contexts) (Garrison et al., 1999). Teaching presence refers to the methods that an instructor uses to "create quality online experiences and sustain productive communities of inquiry" (Bangert, 2008, p. 40). Teaching presence consists of the instructional design and organization,

facilitating discourse (e.g., the way teachers facilitate an online discussion), and direct instruction (T. Anderson, Liam, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). This means that instructors in an online learning environment have three main roles. Instructors play the role of designers who plan and design the course structure and learning tasks including the interaction and evaluation. They also play the role of facilitators to review and comment on student discussion, ask questions, and manage the discussion. Additionally, instructors are subject matter experts who scaffold students' learning experiences through activities such as direct instruction and creating graduated challenges in students' tasks (T. Anderson et al., 2001). In general, the interaction of three core elements: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence, is most likely to create an online collaborative constructivist experience.

Furthermore, based on the Community of Inquiry framework, Vaughan et al. (2013, p.17) recommended seven key principles that are likely to sustain successful blended and/or online learning communities:

1. Plan for the creation of open communication and trust.
2. Plan for critical reflection and discourse.
3. Establish community and cohesion.
4. Establish inquiry dynamics (purposeful enquiry).
5. Sustain respect and responsibility.
6. Sustain inquiry that moves to resolution.
7. Ensure assessment is congruent with intended processes and outcomes.

Vaughan et al. (2013) argued that the first principle is to focus on creating trust through having open communication channels. This is likely to develop into community cohesion in which there is respect, and all parties are aware of their responsibilities in the course and in the LMS. A key focus for any lecturer is to develop students' critical reflection - particularly through engaging in discussions and inquiry that lead to resolution and therefore new learning. The final principle completes the circle and involves congruence between intentions, processes and

outcomes via assessment tasks that link directly to what has been covered in the course. Vaughan et al. (2013) also noted that communication and trust plus critical reflection link to the social and cognitive challenges in designing successful courses, while community and cohesion along with the inquiry aspects involve facilitating a community of inquiry. The last three principles relate to the social, cognitive and assessment responsibilities of guiding an educational experience to achieve the expected outcomes.

Since Vietnam is in the early stages of exploring and adopting a blended learning approach in higher education, it is timely to explore the extent to which Vaughan et al.'s (2013) or Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles of blended learning are evident in the university in this study. This is because both sets of principles emphasize promoting active and collaborative learning, open communication and trust, and respecting students' diverse learning needs. In other words, they indicate principles of good practice that are likely to be important in EFL blended learning programmes.

2.3.3.2 Principles of good practice in EFL instruction

With respect to language pedagogy, there are a number of similarities in the suggested principles for effective second language teaching in literature. Canale and Swain (1980) and Brandl (2008) proposed a number of core teaching principles for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). These principles address key characteristics of CLT such as language teachers' aims of developing students' communicative competence, language teaching techniques, focusing on interaction to develop fluent and accurate communication, and using authentic materials and creating meaningful tasks. Ellis (2005) examined theory and research into what constitutes effective pedagogy for the acquisition of a second language (L2) in classroom contexts, proposing principles for effective instructional practice. These principles address issues relating to: the nature of L2 competence; the focus on both meaning and form; the need to develop both implicit and explicit second language knowledge; the roles of input, output and interaction in learning; the need for taking account of individual differences in learners; and the need to assess language learning in terms of both free and

controlled L2 production. Canale and Swain (1980), Ellis (2005) and Brandl (2008), together emphasize the following principles for effective language teaching:

1. Providing rich language input, which is meaningful and comprehensible
2. Providing opportunities for language production (output) and communicative interactions in the target language
3. Focusing on form and meaning
4. Providing students with constructive feedback on their learning
5. Recognizing and respecting individual differences

Each of the principles is now discussed with reference to the context of my study, namely EFL blended learning in a Vietnamese university.

Firstly, Ellis (1990) refers to input as "the target language samples to which the learner is exposed, [and which] contains the raw data which the learner has to work on in the process of interlanguage construction" (p. 96). Krashen (1981, 1985, 1994) posited the importance of input and developed his comprehensible input hypothesis. This hypothesis proposes that second language is acquired through making sense of what is heard and read. Krashen introduced the formula 'i+1' to express how learners can acquire a language. In this formula, 'i' represents a learner's current level of understanding and '+1' represents knowledge that is a little beyond the learner's existing level of understanding. To make new language input comprehensible to learners, Krashen suggested modifying input by providing suitable scaffolds. This means that the learner is supplied with extra-linguistic cues (such as contextual props) to make sense of input (Krashen, 1989). In agreement with Krashen, Ellis (2005) points out if learners do not receive exposure to the target language, they cannot acquire it; the more exposure they receive, the faster they will learn (Ellis, 2005). Similarly, Brandl (2008) notes that input needs to be rich, and comprehensible through using a wide range of materials that are both authentic and simplified.

Secondly, in addition to language input, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers highlight the important role of learner output and interaction in promoting second language learning (Ellis, 2005; Long, 1983, 1996; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985). Employing the notion of comprehensible input, Long's (1983, 1996) interaction hypothesis proposed that modified interaction through the negotiation for meaning process is necessary to make language input more comprehensible. The term 'negotiation' refers to the modification and restructuring of interaction between speakers when they experience difficulties in comprehension (Pica, 1994). The conversational patterns of the negotiation process include comprehension checks, clarification requests, and self-repetitions or paraphrasing (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013). Thus, through interaction, learners have more opportunities to use the target language that was incomprehensible and more opportunities to produce the target language for output (Swain, 1985).

The comprehensible output hypothesis (Swain, 1985) has evolved from Long's interaction hypothesis. Swain's (1985) comprehensible output hypothesis states that second language acquisition happens when learners attempt to transmit a message but fail and have to find a better way to convey their meaning again. Hence, the demand for conversational comprehension pushes learners to produce the correct form of their utterance, and then they acquire the new form they have produced.

Learner output, or language production, and interaction (Long, 1983, 1996; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985) appears to be better achieved when students have control of the discourse topic (Ellis, 1999). Thus, Ellis (2005) suggests creating opportunities for EFL students to work in a small group because, he argues, acquisition-rich discourse is more likely to follow when students interact with each other. It will be useful in my study to see to what extent exposure to input, and opportunities for output production and to negotiate interaction are present in blended learning programmes.

In general, the first two key principles for second language teaching emphasize that EFL teachers need to provide rich comprehensible target language input, but also create many effective, appropriate opportunities for learners to use the target

language. These two principles are particularly important for Vietnam tertiary learning contexts because of the inequality of access to English language learning (Le, 2015; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2015) as well as few opportunities to practice speaking English with either native speakers or highly proficient English language teachers (Le, 2011; Nunan, 2003). Moreover, there is a strong influence from the Confucian culture on pedagogy (Le, 2011; T. Q. T. Nguyen, 2013, 2017). Much classroom instruction in Vietnam is teacher-centred (Bao, 2013; T. L. G. Hoang & Filipi, 2019), which might adversely affect opportunities for students to undertake authentic interaction in the Vietnamese EFL classroom.

Thirdly, there are two perspectives to Ellis' (2005) term 'focus on form and meaning'. The first refers to semantic meaning (i.e., the meanings of lexical items or of specific grammatical structures) while the second refers to pragmatic meaning (i.e., the highly contextualized meanings that arise in acts of communication).

Ellis (2005) suggests that pragmatic meaning is the most "crucial to language learning" (p. 211). Yet there has been a widespread agreement among SLA researchers that successful acquisition also requires learners to pay attention to form (Brandl, 2008; Ellis, 2005; Schmidt, 1994). For example, Schmidt (1994) has argued that there is no learning without conscious attention to form. Ellis (2016) attempts to define pedagogic focus on form. He emphasizes that 'form' can refer to "lexical (both phonological and orthographic), grammatical, and pragmalinguistic features" (pp. 408-409). In a form-focused lesson, the emphasis is on meaning, but various teaching techniques are designed to attract learners' attention to form while they are using the target language for communication (Ellis, 2016). There are two ways in which focus on form can be incorporated in a teaching context, reactive focus on form (i.e., corrective feedback), and pre-emptive focus on form (i.e., occasions when either the teacher or a student choose to raise attention to language while no error is present). Each of these two types of focus on form can be achieved by means of interaction through negotiation of meaning or negotiation of form, and can be realized by a number of discoursal

strategies (conversational, didactic, student-initiated or teacher-initiated) (Ellis, 2016).

Since the main focus of English blended courses in my study context is to improve students' communicative competence, my study examines this feature and whether the primary focus of teaching activities is on meaning and the ability to hold a conversation in English. I also pay attention to whether there is attention given to help learners attend to linguistic forms, identify and overcome errors.

Fourthly, feedback is regarded as one of the core instructional principles in encouraging and consolidating the learning process (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). Particularly, the role of corrective feedback in classroom contexts has been extensively discussed in SLA research and language pedagogy. Corrective feedback is the response to learner utterances that consist of an error. Corrective feedback can take the form of "(a) an indication that an error has been committed, (b) provision of the correct target language form or (c) metalinguistic information about the nature of the error, or any combination of these" (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006, p. 340). According to Ellis (2016), corrective feedback creates a reactive focus on form that takes place in both negotiation of meaning or negotiation of form process. Error correction is crucial to a learner's interlanguage development because this type of feedback allows the learner to "either accept, reject, or modify a hypothesis about correct language use" (Brandl, 2008, p. 20). Additionally, the findings of corrective feedback research indicate that: a) correcting learners' errors while they are communicating is an effective way of attracting their attention to form; b) corrective feedback may facilitate second language acquisition (Ellis, 2016). Thus, teachers' practices of corrective feedback need to be adapted to and within English language blended courses to establish and maintain effective language teaching.

Lastly, language learning becomes more successful when EFL instruction is "matched to students' particular aptitude for learning" and "students are motivated" (Ellis, 2005, p. 220). Ellis (2005) also argues that it is difficult for most teachers to design lessons that can match well with every student' preferred learning style and learning approach. However, he suggests that teachers can

address variations in students' aptitude by using flexible teaching approaches and a variety of motivating learning activities.

For many years, aptitude and intelligence were considered the most important determinants of second language learners' success or failure in learning a second/foreign language (Nakata, 2006). However, Dörnyei (2003) argues that motivation might play an important role. Self-determination theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000), distinguishes motivation of two broad types: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation relates to activities done because of their own sakes or because they are enjoyable and interesting (Deci & Ryan, 2000). By contrast, extrinsic motivation refers to "behaviors done for other reasons other than their inherent satisfactions" (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2020, p. 2). Instrinsically motivated students engage in a task because they find the task enjoyable and pleasant while extrinsically motivated students are regulated by external forces such as rewards and punishments (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Self-determination theory also suggests that different types of motivation may result in different outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Particularly, high levels of self-determined motivation (identified regulation, and intrinsic motivation) are associated with positive outcomes (long persistence in learning, high levels of effort expended in learning and achievement). Meanwhile, low levels of self-determination (external regulation and amotivation) may lead to negative outcomes including not participating in the task, demonstrating negative emotions and even failure (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

In Vietnamese EFL contexts, motivation has been conceptualized as "the extent to which individuals make choices about what goals they would like to pursue, and the effort they will spend to attain these goals" (T. H. Ngo, 2015, p. 48). T. H. Ngo (2015) also emphasized that motivation might be influenced by the learning context. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013) recommend a range of strategies for language teachers to maintain their students' motivation such as: creating a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom; increasing learner satisfaction; making learning stimulating and enjoyable; promoting interaction

and cooperation among the learners. Additionally, Dörnyei (2001) emphasizes that teachers need to accept responsibility for motivating students. Thus, it is important for course designers and EFL teachers to seek ways to embed motivational opportunities while designing and implementing blended learning.

To sum up, based on reviewing the principles for effective teaching in an EFL blended learning environment, I can draw on several pedagogical principles:

- Creating a safe and comfortable learning environment
- Providing rich, meaningful and comprehensible language input
- Providing opportunities for language production (output) and communicative interactions in the target language
- Promoting active and collaborative learning
- Providing students with constructive corrective feedback on their learning.
- Recognizing and respecting the individual needs of the students.

2.4 Potential benefits of using blended learning approaches in EFL education

Blended learning has been implemented in different subject areas due to its potential benefits. Studies have shown that adopting a blended learning approach in EFL teaching can help EFL students improve learning outcomes, increase learning motivation, increase students' exposure to language input as well as enhance learning interactions and their language output (Fethi & Marshall, 2018; Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017; Gulnaz et al., 2020; Jee & O'Connor, 2014).

Firstly, with regard to learning outcomes, blended learning has been found to help students to perform better at EFL exams compared to students in face-to-face courses (Banditvilai, 2016; Bilgin, 2013; Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017; Zhang & Zhu, 2018). Bilgin (2013) explored the effects of a blended language learning environment on the performance of tertiary students in tests. Participants included 72 Turkish EFL students, who were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. Each group consisted of 36 students. The students in

the experimental group used an LMS as part of their course and followed the required materials of the programme. The LMS offered supplementary online language exercises, vocabulary activities, listening activities, pronunciation activities, exam preparation exercises, language tests and grammar reference units. The control group studied the required materials in a face-to-face environment only. Pre-test, progress test, and post-test achievement data was collected using tests on listening, grammar, vocabulary and reading. The analysis of the test results shows that the experimental group performed better than the control group. Bilgin's findings are similar to those of Banditvilai (2016), Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) and Zhang and Zhu (2018) in which both Thai, Iranian and Chinese students in blended classes were reported to have better academic achievement outcomes compared to students in traditional face-to-face classes. The results of these above studies support the claim that EFL learners' academic outcomes were beneficially impacted as a result of the blended learning environment.

Additionally, the student questionnaire data of the experimental group in Bilgin's study indicates that almost all of the experimental group students agreed that they felt the LMS helped them improve their English. However, the experimental group students did not want to have the online component in face-to-face classes. This finding contrasts with Banditvilai's (2016) findings in which the majority of Thai EFL students had positive attitudes towards using supplementary e-learning resources. For instance, Thai EFL students perceived that the online component helped them better understand the subject matter, enhanced their learning experience and motivated them to self-study. The Thai students also agreed that the English programme with e-learning was more interesting than the normal classroom learning because students could study by themselves without losing interest. By contrast, the focus group interview findings in Bilgin's (2013) study suggest that the compulsory use of the online materials, the design of the programme and the lack of print materials were the main reasons for students' dissatisfaction with the blended programme. Hence, I wonder if the pedagogical design of blended courses might be a factor for students' different attitudes towards blended learning.

Secondly, several studies also demonstrate how student satisfaction and motivation can increase as a result of using a blended learning environment (Clavijo Olarte, Hine, & Quintero, 2008; Jee & O'Connor, 2014; Sucaromana, 2013). For example, Sucaromana (2013) compares the results of blended learning with face-to-face learning among university students studying EFL using three variables: intrinsic motivation for English learning, attitudes towards English as a subject, and satisfaction with the learning climate. The 267 Thai EFL student participants were randomly placed into an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group was taught in a blended mode whereas the control group was taught face-to-face. The research instruments included the pre-test and post-test surveys for both groups. The findings suggest that the students who were taught using blended learning had significantly higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning English as well as greater satisfaction with the learning climate than the students who were taught using face-to-face mode. Sucaromana's (2013) work echoes the assertions of others who have noted that when blended learning is well designed, it enhances student engagement (Jee & O'Connor, 2014), promotes participation and collaboration (Clavijo Olarte et al., 2008), and develops students' confidence and interest (Gulnaz et al., 2020), there is potential to increase students' motivation to improve their language skills.

A third benefit of blended learning indicated in language acquisition research studies is that it can help increase the amount of authentic language input that students receive (Grgurovic, 2011; Gruba & Hinkleman, 2012; King, 2016). Such input is a key principle for successful language teaching and learning. In blended learning, students can be exposed to authentic input accessed through "authentic video, audio, texts and visuals/graphics, providing meaningful content relevant to learners' needs and interests" (King, 2016, p. 8). For example, in Bañados' (2006) study, an innovative Communicative English blended learning programme was implemented in a Chilean university. The blended model incorporated the following: learners' independent work via the platform with the UdeC English Online software; face-to-face EFL classes with teachers who are also students' online tutors; online monitoring facilitated by their teachers; and weekly conversation classes with English native speakers. The UdeC English Online

system included learning materials and learning tools such as voice recorders, wordbook, voice/written chat, discussion forum, message board, reference material, portfolio, progress report, personal diary, and an agenda. The findings indicate that students were provided with written, aural, and visual target language opportunities to support their different cognitive styles.

Banados (2006) also notes that the online learning system used tools which enabled explicit enhancement of input, such as marking specific aural or written forms through colours, enlarged letters, stress, animations, and other modifications and elaborations. This encouraged learners to notice target language later addressed in class, and aimed at contributing to learners' language acquisition. Banados' findings were replicated in Saudi Arabia by Gulnaz et al. (2020), who studied the effectiveness of blended learning from the perspectives of EFL learners. They conducted a survey of 100 EFL students to explore their perceptions and experiences of an English blended course. The findings of Gulnaz et al.'s study indicate that learners felt satisfied because of "being more exposed to the target language through vivid images, videos, audios, reading texts, chatting and discussion forums" (p. 329) in the blended learning environment.

Unlike the blended model designed to increase students' exposure to language input in Banados'(2006) study, in Fethi's and Marshall's (2018) study, Moroccan advanced intermediate-level EFL students were exposed to authentic language input by watching films together in class. At home, students had engaged in pre-listening activities that helped them prepare for the film-related tasks that they would complete together in the class. These Moroccan EFL students then participated in face-to-face class activities such as sharing thoughts and reactions to the films. This blended model appears to have been effective to help high-level of English students be exposed to and comprehend authentic input.

Lastly, blended learning has also been found to have several positive effects on classroom dynamics and intellectual interaction (Clavijo Olarte et al., 2008; Gulnaz et al., 2020; King, 2016; M. Liu, 2013; Miyazoe, 2008). Blended learning offers more opportunities for social interaction in the classroom by freeing up time for both teachers and students (King, 2016). Since students can carry out self-

study online, more time in the face-to-face class can be used to facilitate students' interaction with teachers and peers. In a blended language class, teachers let students take "centre stage", "act" in the classroom or "engage in real-time communication with their peers" (King, 2016, p. 7). For example, M. Liu (2013) conducted a study to evaluate the impact of blended learning in a university EFL writing course in China. Students were asked to complete an 11-item survey questionnaire regarding different aspects of their blended courses. The items covered questions related to teacher's attitude, teaching, the teacher, teaching materials, assignment, assessment, benefits from the course and overall evaluation of the course. The findings show that in this case, blended learning helped increase student-teacher and student-student interactions. This finding is similar to Gulnaz et al.'s (2020) key finding from the student survey of Saudi Arabian EFL learners: that blended learning activities enhance interactions between the teacher and the learners. The findings of M. Liu (2013) and Gulnaz et al. (2020) are also similar to the results of studies in Colombia and Japan by Clavijo Olarte et al. (2008) and Miyazoe (2008), in which both studies found that the incorporation of web-based tools (Blogs, social forum, Moodle) have encouraged interaction among teachers, students and educational resources.

In summary, the reviewed literature highlights several benefits of EFL blended learning in English teaching and learning such as improving learning outcomes, enhancing motivation, engagement and interactions as well increasing students' exposure to language input. These positive benefits seem to be common across the whole range of different EFL contexts in Asia (China, Iran, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand) and outside Asia (Chile, Colombia and Morocco). Given the benefits of the adoption of blended learning in several Asian countries, my study examines if there is similarity with a Vietnamese context too.

2.5 Factors affecting the implementation of blended learning approaches

Research on the implementation of blended learning in language education indicates that the implementation of blended learning in EFL education has been

affected by numerous factors, related to students, teachers and institutions. These factors are discussed in detail below, beginning with students.

2.5.1 Factors relating to students

There are three main factors relating to students that may contribute to implementing blended learning. These include: student perception and experience of blended learning; their levels of self-regulated learning skills; and their computer literacy skills (Cartner, 2009; Hong & Samimy, 2010; Kintu & Zhu, 2016; Moskal & Cavanagh, 2014). Each is addressed in turn.

2.5.1.1 Student perception and experience

Students' perceptions of their own experiences about core aspects of learning and teaching have been highlighted in research investigating the blended learning experiences. For example, Ginn's and Ellis' (2007) extensive meta-analysis study explored the relationship between students' perceptions of blended learning, their approaches to study and their academic performance (course grade). They found that students with positive perceptions of blended learning tended to achieve better grades. They also concluded that teachers using blended learning must understand student perceptions of online learning and how blended learning supports learning across a whole course. Likewise, many other scholars such as Cartner (2009), Hong and Samimy (2010), Neumeier (2005), and Stracke (2007) claim that blended learning can only be effective if students have positive attitudes and a positive blended learning experience.

For example, Stracke's (2007) investigation of students' views on blended language learning explored why three students dropped out of a German university's blended language class after a few weeks. Students were to use two computer programs (CD- ROMs) in a computer laboratory. Both programs, designed for beginners, presented the material in a structured way. The students were expected to self-study a number of lessons from the CD-ROMs for the class meetings. As information such as grammar or vocabulary had already been

presented in the CD-ROM for students' self-study, face-to-face meetings were spent on communicative activities.

The three target students disliked the blended learning experience and left the class for three main reasons. Firstly, students found a lack of support and connection between the face-to-face and online components of the blend. Secondly, they felt that there was a lack of paper used for reading and writing skills. Thirdly, these three students rejected the role of computer as a medium of language learning (Stracke, 2007). The students' reactions may relate more to the nature of the CD-ROM material than necessarily the blended model. Because there is access to more flexible online tools available now (anytime, anywhere, any device), perhaps the same students may have had a different response if they had been learning in 2020 instead of 2007.

Similarly, students' negative perceptions of technology feature in Sagarra and Zapata's (2008) study. They examined attitudes and experience of 245 second language learners learning Spanish using a blended learning approach. They reported that students who had not used computers previously felt unmotivated towards blended learning. Students' attitudes about using digital technologies for learning were a major factor affecting students' concentration and participation in class work. Unlike Stracke's (2007) students' negative perceptions about a lack of integration between online and face-to-face materials, students in Sagarra and Zapata's (2008) study acknowledged the complementary nature of the online and class content materials in their blended language course. What I can draw from these two studies is that students' experiences and perceptions of blended learning approaches were possibly influenced by the nature of the digital technologies available to them, coupled with the organisation and facilitation of the content and design features of the blended courses.

Cartner (2009) explored students' perceptions of the learning activities in a blended English programme in New Zealand. The online components of the course (Academic Word Lists) in the LMS consisted of a facilitator-produced online multimedia activity, words and sentences recordings, and weekly vocabulary tests. Students could access and complete tasks in the online

components from home or university computers at any time and as often as they wanted. The author administered two surveys (2005; 2006) to 52 students in this programme. The findings indicate that "this blended approach to the Academic Word Lists has proven to be successful with learners as can be seen from the students' hits onto the online site and from the positive responses to the two surveys" (p. 38). Cartner also remarks on the importance of having an appealing environment to stimulate students' positive attitudes. This finding confirms that the success of a blended learning environment is partly associated with students' positive attitudes towards that environment.

The findings of Cartner (2009) also correspond with the findings of Kintu and Zhu (2016), which show that learner attitudes towards blended learning are a significant factor influencing learning outcomes in blended environment. The finding confirms that blended learning outcomes (defined as student satisfaction and student motivation) were significantly affected by students' positive or negative attitudes towards blended learning. More specifically, Kintu and Zhu indicate that students in their study generally held positive attitudes towards different aspects of blended learning in relation to student autonomy, quality of instructional methods, course structure, course interface and course interaction.

In Vietnam, little is known about students' perceptions of, and experiences of, the EFL blended learning. Thus, one focus of my study is to explore students' perceptions and experiences of English blended courses and see to what extent students have positive attitudes towards, and positive experience of the blended learning approach. While teachers' views are also important to understand, a later section addresses these.

2.5.1.2 Student self-regulated learning skills

Self-regulation is a critical factor for student success in blended programmes (Barnard, Lan, To, Paton, & Lai, 2009; Setyaningsih, 2020; Van Laer & Elen, 2017). According to McDonald (2014), there is a range of self-regulation skills students need to successfully participate in blended courses. These skills include: organization, discipline, time management, and self-efficacy to manage their own

learning processes. Setyaningsih (2020) for example, conducted a student survey to explore Indonesian EFL tertiary students' perceptions of blended learning. The findings show that although students perceived self-regulation as a contributing factor to their blended learning success, they also identified self-regulation as a hindering factor. The possible explanation for the students' contrasting view is that "students *know* what 'should be' but *do not do* as it should be" (Setyaningsih, 2020, p. 12, author's emphasis).

Self-regulation appears to be a significant factor in students being able to meet the demands of blended learning (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010a; Heaney & Walker, 2012). In particular, many students may not realise the importance or the benefits of their online self-study components, possibly viewing online learning as optional or less important than learning in face-to-face classes (Alebaikan, 2010). It may be that students expect that tertiary courses will be like their experience of secondary school courses: predominantly face-to-face (Alebaikan, 2010).

Tosun (2015) also found that students did not have the self-discipline to study online and to work independently at their own pace, in his investigation on effects of a blended learning approach to teach vocabulary. Tosun sought Turkish university students' perceptions about learning vocabulary in a blended format, drawing on vocabulary pre-tests and post-tests as well as student interviews. The findings show that teaching vocabulary in the chosen blended format did not have a positive impact on students' achievement in vocabulary knowledge. Tosun concluded that a key factor was students' lack of self-discipline in studying online, as a result of the lack of motivation. Some students did not like the digital tools and in-class activities designed by the teacher. Students also confessed that they were lazy and saw the Internet as a means of entertainment and socializing via social media rather than studying vocabulary with online learning tools. Both Alebaikan's and Tosun's studies imply that teachers may have a significant role in guiding the experience of students' online learning. They may also have a significant role in supporting students to develop their self-regulated skills.

Moreover, research shows that students in a blended learning context face difficulties in managing time for studying (Kenney & Newcombe, 2011; Moskal

& Cavanagh, 2014). For example, students seemed to complete and submit tasks at the last minute (Kenney & Newcombe, 2011). This finding seems to be consistent with Moskal and Cavanagh's (2014) study, which indicates that students disliked studying in a blended learning environment partially due to their own procrastination or time management issues. Perhaps this points to students preferring passive learning roles.

In the Vietnamese context, students' self-learning capabilities might pose a challenge to the design and facilitation of blended courses. Firstly, the teaching practice in Vietnam is commonly described as "giving learners the fish" (prepackaged knowledge) rather than "teaching them how to fish" (learning how to learn) (Lap, 2005, p. 1). Students are also familiar with a teacher-centred learning environment where they passively listen and receive knowledge from teachers (D. N. Tran & Williamson, 2009). Research consistently indicates that Vietnamese students are very much dependent learners (L. H. N. Tran, Phan, & Tran, 2018; T. L. Tran, Le, & Nguyen, 2014; Trinh, Lai, Trinh, Tran, & Hoang, 2019). Perhaps the way in which Vietnamese students have experienced learning has trained them to be passive and reactive, rather than self-regulated and active learners.

Secondly, interaction with teachers and peers is regarded as one of the benefits of blended learning approaches. However, there are cultural factors (power relationships or traditional teaching values) in the Vietnamese education system that tend to inhibit the level of students' interaction and collaboration with teachers and peers. Students' engagement in learning activities may be affected by the power relationship between teachers and students (Hofstede et al., 2010). In Vietnamese classrooms, teachers often hold much power and decide almost everything in relation to students' learning (T. Q. T. Nguyen, 2017; T. L. Tran et al., 2014). In addition, many students are unlikely to argue with teachers or peers to avoid hurting them, and students only raise their voice when being requested, due to students' respect for harmony, and face-saving concerns (Ashwill & Diep, 2011; T. Q. T. Nguyen, 2017). Thus, the traditional Vietnamese teacher-student relationship possibly suppresses students' learning (Trinh et al., 2019). Experience

with the traditional teaching practice in Vietnam might cause challenges to students when they later study in a blended learning environment where students are often required to be responsible for their own learning, rather than relying on a teacher to be in charge (Alebaikan, 2010; Launer, 2010).

2.5.1.3 Student computer literacy skills

Since students have to use digital technologies to study in blended courses, their digital proficiency may be a factor in helping or hindering their academic success. Coryell and Chlup (2007) undertook a survey of English language learner programmes across the US. They reported that some learners lacked experience in using computers and often felt fearful or lacked confidence in using digital technologies for learning. These findings align with Hong and Samimy (2010), who found in their study involving 244 EFL students, that students with higher levels of computer literacy skills were more likely to hold a positive view of computer assisted language learning.

Similarly, Taylor and Newton's (2013) research shows that some students perceived that they had insufficient information about the software, technical equipment and skills needed to study in a blended format. Students also reported a sense of feeling "alienated" and "overwhelmed" (Taylor & Newton, 2013, p. 56), or had a sense of feeling lost and struggled to confidently use the online learning components (Moskal & Cavanagh, 2014; Taylor & Newton, 2013). It is evident that students' abilities in using digital technologies for studying in blended environments may be a significant factor in students' academic success in blended learning contexts.

In the Vietnamese university I am using for my study, the majority of tertiary students come from rural and remote areas where they have had few opportunities to learn with and through digital technologies Hence, this feature within the university student population in my study might affect students' digital literacy skills and confidence that are needed to study in a blended learning environment.

2.5.2 Factors relating to teachers

The main teacher-related factors that appear to have an impact on the success of a blended learning course include teachers' perceptions and experiences about how to implement a blended learning course as well as their pedagogical expertise and ICT skills (Chew, 2009; COHERE, 2011; Moskal & Cavanagh, 2014).

2.5.2.1 Teacher perception and experience

Teachers' perceptions and knowledge about pedagogy play an important role in education. According to Borg (2009) teachers' perceptions influence their judgements, which then affect teaching behaviours and student learning. Borg's (2009) view appears to reflect teaching in online learning contexts too. Research in blended learning shows that teachers' perceptions about blended learning play a key role in how well it is implemented (Garrison & Vaughan, 2013; VanDerLinden, 2014). This means that the success of any innovation in education, such as using online learning technologies, or introducing blended learning, may hinge on the extent to which teachers become skilful and confident users of such technologies. Success might also be linked to how well learners are facilitated and supported in a blended learning course. The provision of appropriate and timely professional development for staff in meeting their needs as designers and facilitators of blended courses would seem to be an area to examine.

Research on teachers' perceptions and experiences of blended learning has shown varied findings. Several studies from 2010-2013 (e.g., Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Benson, Anderson, & Ooms, 2011; Korr, Derwin, Greene, & Sokoloff, 2012; Joosten et al., 2013) revealed teachers' negative views of blended learning or their reluctance to implement blended learning. A key reason for teachers' negative attitudes about blended learning relates to the additional workload involved in successfully managing blended learning courses. Some of these workload elements include managing online forums, tutorials and providing one-to-one support to students when needed (Heaney & Walker, 2012). Several research projects note that when teachers have to redesign syllabuses and course learning objectives, it can significantly increase their workload (Korr, Derwin, Greene, &

Sokoloff, 2012). Other teachers have found designing and teaching blended learning courses too difficult and time consuming (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010a; V. Benson, Anderson, & Ooms, 2011). For example, teachers complained they had difficulty in designing classroom activities that integrate online and face-to-face components (Joosten et al., 2013; Levin, Whitsett, & Wood, 2013). When teachers lack digital technology confidence and fluency, moving to blended learning courses require a considerable development of skills. They must learn new knowledge and skills in using digital technologies to "successfully manage online interaction, incorporate new methods of assessment and use tools in the LMS" (Joosten et al., 2013, p.174). For some teachers, this can be overwhelming.

However, more recent studies reveal teachers' positive perceptions of blended learning. Balcı (2017) explored 100 EFL teachers' attitudes in relation to blended learning and its implementation in a Turkish university using survey and interview methods. Balci found that most of the teachers in his study believed that blended learning had benefits in terms of flexibility and opportunities for more target language exposure. Additionally, the teachers believed that blended learning has a positive effect on students' learning, including making learning easier, enhancing students' interest and engagement. Balci's findings are similar to Ju and Mei's (2018) study in which teachers generally have positive perceptions of blended learning approaches. Ju and Mei (2018) investigated five teachers' perceptions and practices of blended learning in foreign language teaching in a Malaysian higher education context. Their findings indicate that teachers saw a range of potential benefits of blended learning, such as the convenience of access; the shift to the learner-centred approach; and opportunities for students to practice the target language and be independent in their learning.

Blended learning is a relatively new development in Vietnam (Bouilheres et al., 2020; N. T. Hoang, 2015), and this newness is reflected in my study context as well. To date, only a few studies have been conducted to explore how Vietnamese EFL teachers perceived and experienced blended learning. For example, N. T. Hoang (2015) investigated EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of blended learning at a tertiary level. Hoang collected data from three sources: interviews

with teachers, faculty executives and online service providers; observations of teachers' teaching in face-to-face classes; and monitored teachers' activities via the institution's LMS. Hoang's findings indicate that these EFL teachers in Vietnam appear to have positive perceptions of blended learning. The participant teachers believe that blended learning helps to provide students with rich learning resources and flexible learning time; enhances teachers' monitoring of student learning; and reduces teachers' workload and teaching efforts in presenting content knowledge.

T. H. Nguyen (2019) investigated EFL teachers' beliefs of and practices of giving oral corrective feedback in a blended learning course. T. H. Nguyen (2019) collected data from six EFL teachers using multi-methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, stimulated recall sessions, focus group discussions and narrative frames. The findings show that teachers perceived the importance role of grammar accuracy and of oral corrective feedback. However, teachers were concerned about students' negative reactions when receiving corrective feedback. Teachers wanted to improve students' fluency and confidence in English speaking because they assumed that their students were often shy and had low-English proficiency and motivation. The teachers' beliefs appear to affect their practices of giving effective corrective feedback, potentially preventing themselves from achieving their aims of improving students' speaking skills. In Vietnam, little is known about how EFL teachers perceive and experience blended learning approaches, so it is timely to explore these issues.

2.5.2.2 Teachers' pedagogical expertise and ICT skills

Understanding student-centred pedagogy is considered as a critical factor contributing to the effectiveness of blended learning implementation since this can help teachers to address students' diverse learning needs and facilitate their active and collaborative learning (COHERE, 2011; Marsh, 2012; Niemiec & Otte, 2010). Student-centred teaching in a blended classroom is often characterised by students' active involvement in the learning process (e.g., learning independently, working collaboratively online, reviewing and self-correcting) and teachers' facilitation of

the blending (e.g., encouraging autonomous and collaborative learning, creating a supportive online community, facilitating online interaction) (Marsh, 2012).

However, research suggests that many EFL teachers have not altered their pedagogy to possibly better suit a blended learning environment. In particular, Alebaikan and Troudi (2010b) investigated the use of the LMS in blended learning contexts in Saudi Arabian universities. The study focused on identifying students and instructors' perceptions of the effectiveness of the way online discussions were undertaken in the LMS. Their findings showed that the participant instructors had limited pedagogical and technological knowledge in teaching in a blended learning environment. More specifically, the instructors demonstrated limited understanding about their roles in managing and facilitating online discussions, possibly because this was unfamiliar. They were unaware of how to give timely online feedback or manage the quality of the discussions. As a result, students' blended learning experiences were negatively impacted. For example, one of the student participants reported that there was "no real discussion" in the forum because he did not receive the instructor's feedback for his post apart from some "thankful reply" from peers (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010b, p. 510). This student wanted online discussions with peers and lecturers rather than only a higher grade. Thus, the role of teachers would be guiding, directing and facilitating the quality of discussions.

Consistent with Alebaikan and Troudi's (2010b) study, N. T. Hoang (2015) claims that Vietnamese EFL teachers in his study also had little understanding of effective EFL blended instruction. Hoang used the technological, pedagogical and content knowledge (TPACK) model (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) as an analytical framework to investigate teachers' knowledge in teaching EFL in a blended environment. The TPACK model was an expansion of the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) model theorised by Shulman (1986). According to Mishra and Koehler (2006), to teach with technology in a blended environment, EFL teachers need to understand the interrelationships between the following types of knowledge: technological knowledge (knowledge of technology), pedagogical

knowledge (knowledge of English teaching), and content knowledge (knowledge of the English language).

N. T. Hoang's (2015) findings indicate that EFL teachers in his study appeared to have no intention of using technological affordances to create changes in their teaching content and pedagogy to address students' EFL learning problems or maximize support for students' EFL learning. Hoang identified three influential factors affecting teachers' perceptions and practices of blended learning. They were: the influence of the prevalent teacher-centred pedagogy; the institutional management and leadership styles; and teachers' fragmented TPACK of implementing blended learning in EFL education. Hoang highlighted the need to improve educational leaders' understanding of how to blend e-learning with traditional teaching within the local context. He also suggested a framework for training EFL teachers to teach in a blended learning environment.

In Vietnam, focusing on student-centred pedagogy has been supported by the Higher Education reform agenda (Vietnamese Government, 2005). Subsequently, various training programmes, workshops and seminars have been conducted to equip and assist Vietnamese teachers with knowledge and skills for implementing student-centred pedagogy (Harman & Nguyen, 2010). However, subsequent research indicates that there is still a lack of understanding of student-centred teaching approaches (Hieu, 2014; H. B. Nguyen & Le, 2012; Thanh & Renshaw, 2013). Traditional teaching and learning modes continue to dominate Vietnamese higher education (N. T. Hoang, 2015; B. H. Nguyen, 2013). These traditional teaching practices appear to challenge the ability of any tertiary institute in Vietnam to implement blended learning environments, and make changes to pedagogical practices that more readily reflect student-centred approaches.

A range of studies have demonstrated that although many EFL teachers in Vietnam have been aware of the benefits of ICT in their teaching (T. T. N. Pham et al., 2018; Vo, 2019), there is a consistent trend of them self-reporting low confidence in being able to use digital technologies competently (X. T. Dang, 2013; H. B. Nguyen & Le, 2012; V. L. Nguyen, 2016; Peeraer & Van Petegem, 2010; T. T. N. Pham et al., 2018; Thu, Nicholas, & Lewis, 2012). Teachers appear

to restrict themselves to PowerPoint, and Word processing, which they use for preparing content and other documentation for their classes (Pham et al., 2018). Several teachers also report that they do not have the ability to solve technical digital technology problems when they occur (Vo, 2019). H.B. Nguyen and Le (2012) and Vo (2019) report that this low confidence and competence may be linked to a paucity of professional development opportunities that would help them teach EFL classes using technology. Perhaps this is one area my study can investigate.

2.5.3 Factors relating to higher education institutions

Factors relating to higher education institutions include technological infrastructure issues, institutional advocacy, and training and support for teachers (Comas-Quinn, 2011; Hofmann, 2012; Larsen, 2012).

2.5.3.1 Technological issues

Factors such as the user-friendliness of technological infrastructure and the quality of server technology for faculty and students may have an impact on the effectiveness of course management systems (Y.-H. Liu & Tourtellott, 2011; Taylor & Newton, 2013). Particularly, the engagement of students in online activities can be enhanced if the quality of servers is updated (Carbonell, Dailey-Hebert, & Gijselaers, 2013). However, many higher education institutions worldwide have poor technical infrastructure, including issues of internet connections (Al Bataineh, Banikalef, & Albashtawi, 2019; Alebaikan, 2010; N. T. Hoang, 2015), insufficient additional software, that might help design blended courses (Alebaikan, 2010) or issues relating to technological stability and reliability (Al Bataineh et al., 2019; Chew, 2009; Comas-Quinn, 2011; Setyaningsih, 2020; B. M. Wright, 2017).

Lecturers in Alebaikan's (2010) study reported that they preferred using their own laptops. They also preferred completing all online tasks while they were on campus at work. Therefore, they wanted the entire campus to be accessible via wi-fi. However, wi-fi was only available in some faculties' offices. Even those offices

suffered from frequent disconnections. As a result, lecturers were frustrated with the poor and unstable internet infrastructure, and this adversely affected their online teaching. Similarly, the majority of teacher participants in N. T. Hoang's (2015) study also commented that the combination of poor and slow internet networks in classrooms discouraged them from frequently monitoring students' online learning and giving students feedback as soon as possible.

Students also complain about poor technological infrastructure. For example, Mudra (2018) indicates that slow internet connections were common issues facing both EFL teachers and learners in blended learning environments. These issues discouraged teachers from implementing online teaching as planned and also discouraged students from completing their online learning tasks. Likewise, students in Al Bataineh et al.'s (2019) study encountered lots of technical problems with computers, software, and internet connection while studying online. They disliked trying to learn English in a poorly provisioned language lab, using old computers. Having a robust and reliable internet infrastructure appears to help both teachers and students in blended learning contexts.

2.5.3.2 Institutional advocacy and teacher training

The institutional advocacy among administrators, faculty, and other institutional personnel is a key factor in the successful implementation of blended learning in higher education (O'Dowd, 2013; Taylor & Newton, 2013). Garrison and Kanuka (2004) and Vaughan (2007) comment that administrators play a key role in developing a shared vision for blended learning implementation, extending communication, and making funding and other resources available. However, research shows that there is a lack of awareness and clear institutional policy to support the implementation of blended learning (COHERE, 2011; N. T. Hoang, 2015; Wallace & Young, 2010). For example, Wallace and Young (2010) highlight the urgent need for institutions to: clearly identify the goals of any shift to blended learning; develop a resource and implementation plan; and develop and implement policies to support faculty workload. Without a clear vision and implementation plan, shifting to blended learning risks resulting in poor use of resources, user frustration, and negatively impacting learning outcomes (Wallace

& Young, 2010). Additionally, most of the teachers in N. T. Hoang's (2015) study pointed out that implementing blended courses might be negatively affected by an institution's insufficient technical support, inappropriate administrative regulations, and ineffective supervision of teachers' online teaching. Betts (2014) also reports that the lack of adequate equipment such as computers and software to support online/blended learning from the institution would probably inhibit faculty from continuing teaching and/or developing online/blended courses. Ways that institutions create good conditions for developing blended learning appear to be significant factors.

Moreover, research has also identified a need for teachers to know how to adapt to a blended learning context (N. T. Hoang, 2015; Larsen, 2012). Larsen (2012) emphasizes that teachers need both pedagogical and technological support to effectively teach in a blended format. This also implies ongoing support. However, in many instances, teachers reported being given little training to teach in blended classes (Alebaikan, 2010; Y. Ryan, Tynan, & Lamont-Mills, 2013). Teachers also lack professional development and technical support to design and deliver blended learning courses effectively (V. Benson et al., 2011; Betts, 2014; Vaughan, 2007). Benson et al. (2011) argue that the professional development workshops in their research site would help academic staff to learn how to make podcasts, how to set up social networks, or how to use electronic assessment. However, there is still a need for further professional development to encourage academic staff to think deeply about pedagogy, then developing course materials to ensure effective students learning.

In Vietnam, there are several institutional factors that may adversely affect implementing blended learning approaches. Firstly, the directions and purposes of the use of ICT in education appear to be neither clear nor well-established (Peeraer & Van Petegem, 2010). A number of scholars report that there is a lack of guidelines, training and support for the use of ICT at an institutional level (H. B. Nguyen & Le, 2012; Peeraer et al., 2009; Thu et al., 2012; Vo, 2019). Secondly, access to ICT resources is still rather limited for both teachers and students (Huong, 2009; Thu et al., 2012; Vo, 2019) despite considerable governmental investment

for the upgrade of technological infrastructure. There continue to be gaps in the way institutions in Vietnam support blended learning in EFL teaching contexts.

In summary, several key points should be noted from the reviewed studies. Firstly, the studies in the last five years have focused on several aspects of blended learning in higher education such as teachers' and students' perceptions and experiences of blended learning (e.g.,Balcı, 2017; Ju & Mei, 2018; Mudra, 2018; Setyaningsih, 2020; B. M. Wright, 2017); effectiveness of blended learning (e.g.,Tosun, 2015); relationship between student characteristics and learning outcomes (e.g.,Kintu & Zhu, 2016); and factors affecting self-regulation in blended learning (e.g.,Van Laer & Elen, 2017). However, there is a paucity of research that specifically focuses on factors affecting the implementation of EFL blended learning. Secondly, there appear to be few studies that focus on EFL blended learning in Vietnamese contexts. One exception is N. T. Hoang's (2015) study, which particularly focused on exploring EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of blended learning approaches at tertiary level. Another exception is H. T. Nguyen's (2019) study, which investigated EFL teachers' beliefs and practices of giving oral corrective feedback in a blended learning environment. Thirdly, while researchers discuss a range of factors that affect how well blended learning would work or would not work, very few consider the interactions and systemic contradictions between such factors. Using Activity Theory (see Methodology chapter) may help address such interactions. My study investigated staff's and students' perceptions and experiences related to EFL blended learning in one Vietnamese higher education institution. It also sought to identify factors that facilitate or impede the adoption of EFL blended learning, and to explore the relationships between those factors.

2.6 Chapter summary

The chapter has reviewed the literature in four main aspects in relation to my study.

Firstly, this literature review seeks to clarify our understanding of teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), especially English teaching methodologies in the context of Vietnamese higher education. Moreover specifically, it attempts

to establish and explore links between EFL teaching and the emergence of blended learning as a new teaching delivery mode.

Secondly, in the literature I have examined a number of areas that make up blended learning, such as definitions and types, as well as the drivers behind the adoption of blended learning in higher education. The review indicated there is a lack of a universal definition of blended learning, and that there is diversity in categorizing blended learning systems in educational settings. However, there appears to be broad agreement in terms of the reasons for implementing blended including: improved pedagogy, improved flexibility, and cost-effectiveness.

Thirdly, I have reviewed the literature on the use of blended learning approaches in EFL education. More particularly, I considered CALL and EFL blended learning, and the language acquisition as well as pedagogical principles of EFL blended learning. I aimed to understand the theoretical foundations of EFL blended learning and how they relate to my research context.

Lastly, I examined what the literature has said about the potential benefits of using blended learning approaches in the field of EFL education. These benefits appear to have been improving learning outcomes, enhancing motivation and interaction as well as increasing the exposure to the target language input. I also examined critical factors related to students, teachers and institutions which might affect the successful implementation of blended learning approaches in EFL education.

Overall, the literature review has shown that the use of blended learning has the possibility to create an active, rich and collaborative learning environment for EFL education. However, the implementation of EFL blended learning can be influenced by numerous factors, which need to be addressed to establish an effective practice of EFL blended learning. The literature discussed in this chapter suggests a number of gaps that my study aims to address. Firstly, there is an emerging body of research into EFL blended learning in the Vietnamese higher education contexts which deserves attention. Secondly, further research needs to be done to explore factors affecting the EFL blended learning implementation and the dynamic relationships between factors that are identified. Thirdly, further

studies drawing on multiple data sources (from different participants such as EFL programme leaders, EFL teachers and EFL students), need to be conducted to develop a comprehensive view of multiple perspectives surrounding EFL blended learning implementation. Therefore, to address the research gaps identified in the literature above, the overarching question of the research is:

How do factors within a Vietnamese university context affect the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning environment?

In order to address the above question, it is necessary to take into account different stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of English blended courses. As a result, the thesis sought answers to the following research sub-questions:

1.What are Vietnamese programme leaders' perceptions and practices of a blended learning design?

2.What are Vietnamese teachers' perceptions and practices of a blended learning approach?

3.What are Vietnamese learners' perceptions and experiences of a blended learning approach?

4. What factors contribute to affecting the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning approach?

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The chapter presents the underlying philosophy, methodology and my positioning in the research. It starts with a discussion about my philosophical stances, and my decision to adopt a mixed methods approach in relation to the research questions. It then reports on the research design, the justification of employing the Activity Theory as an analytical framework, and the research methods. The chapter ends by discussing the role of researcher, ethical considerations, and issues of reliability and validity.

3.2 Research paradigm

Explaining the concept of research paradigm is to clarify a researcher's assumptions that shape his/her approach to research. To attempt to achieve this, I discuss a brief overview of basic principles of the pragmatism paradigm and my justification for paradigm choice.

Guba and Lincoln define a paradigm as "a basic system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontological and epistemological fundamental ways" (1994, p. 105). Ontology concerns questions about the nature of being and reality in the world (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, & Bell, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Meanwhile, epistemology is concerned with the "very bases of knowledge-its nature and forms, how it can be acquired, and how communicated to other human beings" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 7). Thus, epistemology refers to the question of how we know the world and the relationship between the researchers and what can be known (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The ontological and epistemological assumptions of researchers influence their decisions regarding research paradigms. My philosophical worldview in this research aligns with the tenets of Pragmatism (B. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Mertens, 2015; Morgan, 2014; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). With regard to

ontology, pragmatists believe in "an external world independent of the mind as well as that lodged in the mind" (Creswell, 2009, p. 11). Concerning epistemology, within pragmatism, all sources of knowledge of the external world is built upon experience (Morgan, 2014). Thus, individuals have their own unique understanding of that world based on their individual experience (Mertens, 2015).

Moreover, much of individuals' knowledge is "socially shared because it comes from socially shared experience" (Morgan, 2014, p. 39). In particular, social experience is created when a person accomplishes a course of joint actions with other people in communities (Mertens, 2015; Morgan, 2014). Therefore, pragmatists assert that all knowledge of the world is both "real" and "socially constructed" (Morgan, 2014, p. 39) as human actions cannot be separated from past experiences and the beliefs emerging from those experiences.

However, pragmatists also emphasize that questions about the nature of reality (ontology) and theory of knowledge (epistemology) are not as important as whether knowledge is useful to guide actions according to their likely consequences (Cherryholmes, 1992; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Thus, the central focus of a pragmatist is to find out "what works" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017, p. 39), and what enables solutions to problems (Patton, 1990). Such above assumptions match well with my worldview in this study. I am interested in looking for *what works* regarding my research questions under investigation. In other words, I am interested in looking for practical solutions to real-world problems related to the implementation of EFL blended learning in a Vietnamese university context.

In my case, I realized that both teachers and students felt challenged and uncomfortable when they faced a blended learning environment. I noticed that some problems emerged when a blended learning approach was adopted in teaching English to university students. For example, teachers were reluctant to use online learning tools and digital technologies in teaching, and students experienced difficulties in regulating their English learning. Thus, I needed to understand these problems to better address them. I was keen to explore what EFL students and EFL teachers perceive as factors contributing to or inhibiting students'

learning activities in a blended environment. The programme leaders, who designed the courses and are in charge of staff teaching, are also important people so I want to know their perspectives of English blended courses (EBCs) as well.

From a pragmatic approach, I believe that by understanding the needs and wants of people taking part in EBCs as well as materials and skills available at the given time, I am more likely to identify practical solutions to some of the problems they have experienced. I am also mindful that it is not possible for my research findings to be viewed as definite solutions to the problem. Thus, my emphasis is to create meaningful knowledge about teaching and learning English in a blended form in a specific Vietnamese context. Hopefully, what I can learn from my research within my context will help to improve the quality of EFL blended learning in my university.

The next section explains the need for choosing the specific design that best fits the problem and the research questions in my study.

3.3 Mixed methods research

According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2017), research designs are "procedures for collecting, analysing, interpreting, and reporting data in research studies" (p. 51). The method should be decided by the research purpose (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) so I based my choice of mixed methods on the nature of the phenomena being examined. Mixed methods research is known as both a method and a methodology that "involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches at many phases of the research process" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 5).

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) indicate that there are three reasons why mixed methods (MM) research appears to have more advantages than a mono method design: (a) to address simultaneously confirmatory and exploratory questions; (b) to strengthen inferences from research findings through triangulation of (two)

different datasets; (c) to give a greater assortment of divergent viewpoints by allowing different voices and perspectives to emerge from generated inferences.

In relation to my study, the reason for using mixed methods had to do with the nature of my research purpose. The primary aim of this study is to explore factors within a Vietnamese university context that affect EFL blended learning. In order to understand the complex nature of my research problem, I used mixed methods collection tools and data analysis as I believed they would provide a broader perspective and deeper understanding of those influential factors than could be achieved by a single-method design.

There are different core mixed methods designs described in the literature, and deciding on the appropriate research design is a critical decision. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) suggested researchers should answer the question "What is the intent for you to collect and integrate both quantitative and qualitative data" (p. 61) before choosing the core design.

My approach for mixing methods in this study fits to the convergent design. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) stated that:

> The convergent design is a mixed methods design in which the researcher collects and analyses two separate data sets - quantitative and qualitative - then examines the two data sets for the purpose of gaining greater understanding of the blended learning experiences (p. 68).

The major intentions of convergent design include: to gain a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study by comparing quantitative results and qualitative findings; to validate one set of findings with the other (Creswell &Plano Clark, 2017); or to integrate the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative methods (Patton, 1990). With these intentions in mind, I took the view that the quantitative data generated from an online student survey would provide insights into what students perceive as key factors affecting their English learning in a blended environment. The online survey is likely to focus on more general ideas whereas interviews would give me richer data, focusing on how

people think and feel. Therefore, I also collected data from interviews. One-to-one interviews with students aimed to explore what they perceived and experienced in EBCs. Individual interviews were also conducted with teachers and programme leaders of EBCs to gain their perspectives about what they identified as factors affecting students' English learning activity via blended modes. Integrating and analysing a range of datasets helped me to have deeper understanding of my research problem.

In the next section, I give an overview of Activity Theory and justify my choice of Activity Theory as a methodological framework.

3.4 Activity Theory as a methodological framework

This section provides an overview of Activity Theory, three generations of Activity Theory, its basic principles and my justification of using Activity Theory as a methodological framework.

3.4.1 Historical overview and elements of Activity Theory

According to Engeström (2001), Activity Theory originated from Soviet Russian cultural-historical psychology of Lev Vygotsky in the late 1920's and early 1930's, and has evolved through three generations. The first generation is known as Vygotsky's mediated action triangle (see Figure 3.1). Vygotsky studied the concept of mediation and interaction that are the basis of human learning. Vygotsky posits that subjects use tools, which are culturally specific artifacts or language, to control and reach their goals (object).

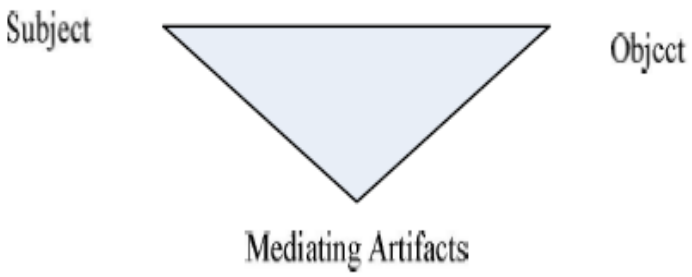


Figure 3.1. Vygotsky's mediated action

According to Engeström (2001), the weakness of the first generation of Activity Theory was that it represents activity at an individual level. Hence, the second activity generation was developed by Leontiev (1981) with three levels: activities, actions and operations. At the first level, which is driven by a goal or a motive, it explains why something is done. At the second level, it shows what conscious action is done and at the third level, which consists of operations, it explains how it is done. Leontiev (1981) also explicated that actions can be individual or collective, thus denoting the social nature of activity.

Engeström (1987) built on Leontiev's notions and developed an expanded model of Activity Theory, which added three elements, rules, community and division of labour (see Figure 3.2). This expanded Activity Theory model, known as the second generation of Activity Theory, shifted the unit of analysis from individual focus to that of a collective activity system (Bloomfield & Nguyen, 2015).

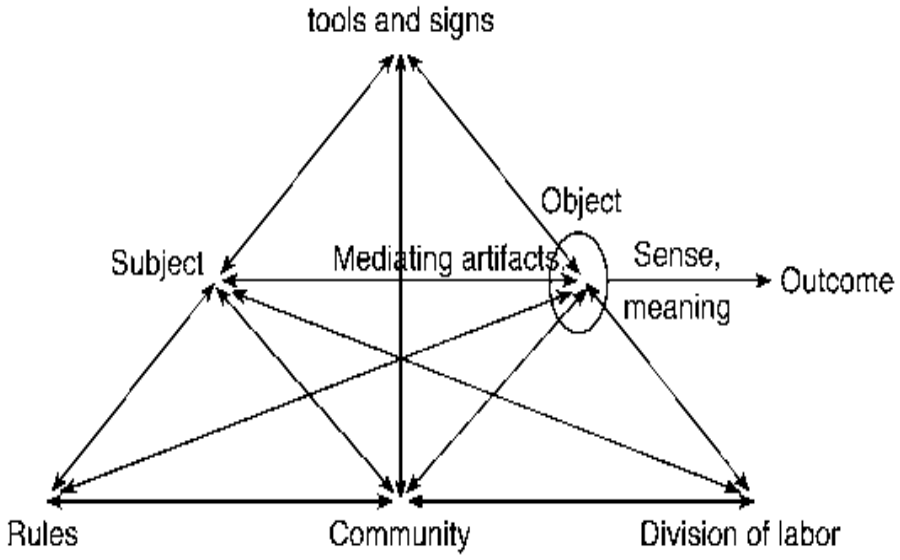


Figure 3.2. The structure of a human activity system
(Engeström, 1987, p.78)

Engeström's (1987) activity system model is represented as a triangle diagram, which consists of six key elements. *Subject* refers to the individual or groups of individuals involved in an activity (Engeström, 1987). *Tools and Signs* include physical or psychological artefacts that are culturally, historically and socially situated. For example, in contexts related to blended learning, tools can be digital

technologies. These artefacts mediate the relationship between subjects and their object (Bellamy, 1996). *Object* is the goal, purpose or target of an activity that can be achieved within a system, then transformed into an outcome with the help of mediating tools. *Rules* are a set of "explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions" (Engeström, 1990, p. 79) that contribute to regulating the community's actions and interactions. They can be, for instance, classroom norms, university requirements, or existing pedagogy. The community is the social group engaged in the activity for the same purpose. In my study context, the community can consist of teachers, students, course designers, IT staff, and faculty executives. *Division of labour* defines the distribution of roles, tasks and responsibilities among members of the community. *Division of labour* can be horizontal when the actions and activities are shared equally among members of the community. Meanwhile, the division is vertical when those in authority exert power on the other members of the community. For example, faculty executives may exert authority on teachers, and teachers exert power on students.

The third generation of Activity Theory arose since the second generation of Activity Theory did not allow the analysis of the interactions of multiple activity systems. Engeström (2001) argues that "when activity went interactional, questions of diversity and dialogue between different traditions or perspectives became increasingly serious challenges" (p.135). Thus, the third generation of Activity Theory helps address these above challenges because it expanded the unit of analysis from one activity system to at least two interacting systems as the minimum of analysis (see Figure 3.3).

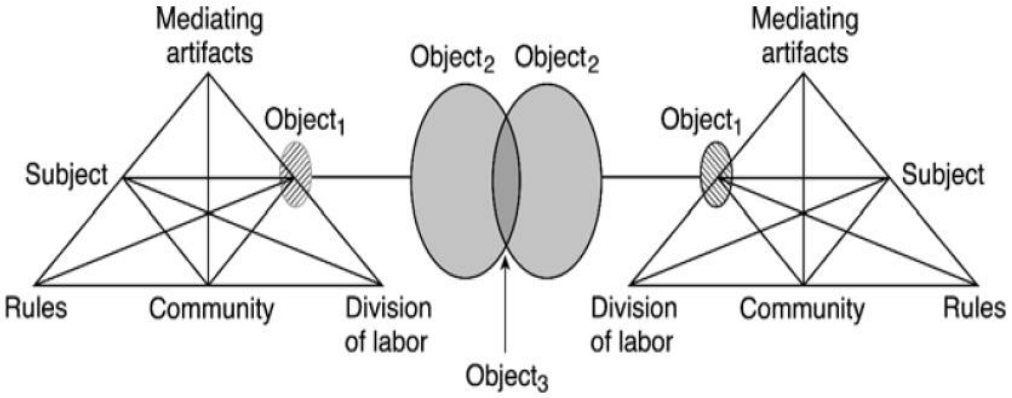


Figure 3.3. Two interacting activity systems as minimal model for the third generation of activity theory
(Engeström, 2001, p. 136)

This new generation of Activity Theory allows to "understand dialogues, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting activity systems" (Engeström, 2001, p. 135). This means that the new Activity Theory mode allows the analysis of the interactions between the central/main activity and its neighbouring activities. For example, in the case of my study, within the same system of a blended learning implementation, student learning activity is interrelated with teacher teaching activity and designing activity because all these three activity systems aim to improve students' English knowledge and skills.

3.4.2 Basic principles of Activity Theory

Several basic principles of Activity Theory, namely, object-orientedness, hierarchical structure of activity, internalization vs. externalization, mediation, development and multi-voicedness of activity systems, and contradictions have been discussed by different authors (Engeström, 1993, 2001; Kaptelinin, 1996b; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Leontiev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). These principles are presented below:

Object-orientedness: signifies that an object is part of every activity. Human activities are related to their objects and the object distinguishes one activity from another (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006), and studying the object is important to

understand human beings' activity. Engeström (1993) noted that objects can also be external or internal, which are molded or transformed into outcomes with the intervention of tools (mediating instruments and signs). Thus, in the context of my research, it is important to identify the objective/purpose of each of three activity systems (designing, teaching and learning) and examine how the blended learning tools can mediate the relationship between *Subject* and *Object* to produce an *Outcome*.

Hierarchical structure of activity: According Leontiev (1981), there are three layers of human activities including activities, actions, and operations. Activity is oriented by the specific object (motive), and then is broken into actions that are conscious processes performed to attain the goal identified by the subject. After that, goal-directed actions are carried out by a range of operations, which are driven by the certain conditions under which operations occur.

Internalization vs. Externalization: Vygotsky (1978) proposed the concepts of internalization and externalization, which describe the mechanisms underlying the origin of mental process. It states that the mental processes result from external actions "through the course of internalization" (Kaptelinin, 1996b, p. 55). In other words, any human activity consists of internal and external elements. In the process of internalization, external activities become internal activities while externalization transforms internal activities into external ones.

Mediation: Kaptelinin (1996a) indicates that human activity is mediated by a number of tools. Tools are created to mediate human activities and can be modified and transformed over the years, during the development of activities. Tools carry both cultural and historical features with them from their transformation. In this study, the adoption of a blended learning approach and its tools can be seen to mediate students' English learning.

Development: Activity systems are created and transformed as a result of certain historical developments under certain conditions, so Kaptelinin (1996b) states that in order to understand a human activity, one may need to understand the context of the development. Engeström (2001) added that exploring the history of tools

and the theoretical aspects of an activity is very crucial to analyse the developmental processes. Thus, it is imperative to understand the benefits of blended learning in language education, the challenges to the implementation of blended learning, and underpinning theories for implementing blended learning in teaching EFL.

Multi-voicedness of activity systems: Multi-voicedness comes from the subjects' different backgrounds with their own histories, so they express diverse traditions, interests and viewpoints in the activity systems. That is why the multi-voicedness concept is explained as a "source of trouble and a source of innovation, demanding actions of translation and negotiation" (Engeström, 2001, p. 136).

Contradictions as a source of change and development: According to Engeström (2001), contradictions can be identified as structural tensions that have been accumulated over the years. Contradictions consist of four levels: primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary (Engeström, 1987). Firstly, the primary tensions exist within each component of the central activity system. For example, in my study, the participants' perceptions of blended learning might contrast to their practice of blended learning. Secondly, an activity system is not static, and may be constantly changing through the adoption of new objects, being subjected to new rules, or using new tools. When the activity system embraces new elements from outside, there exists the potential for a 'collision' between the constituent elements of the activity system, which can be secondary contradictions in the activity system. In my study context, the application of digital technologies in teaching English for students via a blended mode (*Tools*) may collide with the traditional teaching and learning practices (*Rules*) or the inappropriate roles and distributions of responsibilities (*Division of labour*). These contradictions may create conflicts or interruptions; however, these contradictions can lead to innovations and development in teaching pedagogy when they are solved. Tertiary contradictions within an activity system occur when a more "culturally advanced" (Engeström, 1987, p. 103) activity is introduced into that system. Quaternary contradictions emerge between the central activity and other neighbouring activities within its network system. For instance, the designing activity or the

teaching activity may not facilitate student learning activity in blended courses, leading to the quaternary contradictions.

In conclusion, these principles are not isolated ideas. They are closely interrelated within an interacting system. In the next section, I explain why I used Activity Theory as a methodological framework.

3.4.3 Rationales for using Activity Theory as a methodological framework.

In my study, Activity Theory is used as a framework for several reasons.

Firstly, understanding and describing human activity in real-world situations often involves complex data collection, analysis, and presentation methods. Thus, I relied on activity system analysis because it provides a systematic approach to data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the findings (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). In my research, Activity Theory functioned at different levels, and was applied with data collection, for example, when I determined the criteria for the research setting. Furthermore, the Activity Theory data analysis is an inductive process, which can lead me to develop a rich description of the participants, their activities, and the activity setting in which these activities are situated for my research.

Secondly, Activity Theory can help researchers "understand systemic contradictions and tensions" (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 5). Particularly, the use of this framework allows me to reveal the contradictions/tensions within each element or between elements of the activity systems of my research participants, to unpack the reasons for these contradictions, and describe how these systematic contradictions create changes in a university system.

Thirdly, Activity Theory, which originated from a sociocultural perspective, is a contextually-related and culturally-based framework. Therefore, it might be an ideal tool to describe "culturally mediated human activity" (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 19) in my research context, especially when a new tool such as a blended learning approach is implemented in a traditional university system. Activity Theory may help me unpack the complex intertwining of Vietnamese

teachers' and learners' thoughts and their practice of blended learning, which might be significantly influenced by the history of cultural factors or the traditional education values. It allows me to conceptualize how students' English learning activities are mediated by blended learning tools, and identify what artifacts/tools introduced in blended courses could become influential tools in students' activity system.

3.5 Sampling procedures

3.5.1 Research site

This study was conducted at a state university in Vietnam, to be referred to as VUni, where I have worked for more than 10 years. There are two reasons why I chose this university as the research site. Firstly, according to Marshall and Rossman (2011) conducting research in the familiar site brings the researcher considerable benefits such as: ease of gaining access to the research site and recruiting participants as well as enhancing good rapport and communication with participants. Second, such above benefits are considered to contribute to the quality of the research findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

3.5.2 Participant selection

According to Sarantakos (2005), there are two main sampling methods including probability and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling in relation to quantitative research involves choosing a sample that represents the population under investigation (Sarantakos, 2005). Non-probability sampling is where participants are chosen for particular reasons in terms of convenience, quota or purpose (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). For collecting quantitative data, I used self-selected sampling - one type of non-probability sampling method (Sterba & Foster, 2008). I invited a large sample of students to participate in the online survey to get a broader understanding about students' views of English blended courses (EBCs). In addition, for collecting qualitative data, I mainly used a purposeful sampling technique to recruit three cohorts of participants. A more in-depth description of groups of participants is presented below.

3.5.2.1 Participants in the online survey

The participants in the online survey were drawn from all second-year non English major students from three faculties in a multi-disciplinary university in Vietnam., to be referred to as Faculty A, Faculty B, and Faculty C. This participant pool was targeted for two main reasons. Firstly, the blended learning approach was first used to teach English for students of these three faculties, rather than for the whole student cohort at the university. Secondly, the participants of the study were in their second year of university. As these students had studied English in higher education for one year, they were chosen because they are assumed to have clearer goals and greater experience in learning English than their peers in their first year. This greater experience might enable them to better understand and articulate their perceptions of studying English in a blended environment, and identify the challenges or benefits they are having when learning English in blended forms.

I visited each of the English classes of students in these three faculties and gave the student participants a brief introduction about the aim of the research and invited them to participate in an online survey via link sent to their email. From the possible cohort of 1200 students across all 3 faculties, 918 agreed to provide their contact email addresses so that I could email them the link to the online survey. All participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and it would not result in any consequences in relation to their study.

3.5.2.2 Participants in semi-structured interviews

Three groups of participants were invited to attend to semi-structured interviews.

Group 1: 70 students completing the online survey agreed to attend follow-up semi-structured interviews. However, only 15/70 students had provided contact information. I phoned all 15 students to arrange date, time, and place for meeting. Finally, only 7 students came to the interview as planned. There were 5 female and 2 male student participants across all three faculties with the age range from 19-20. All of them reported beginning to learn English from grade three (age 8-9)

at primary schools. They had all spent more than 10 years learning English as a compulsory school subject before entering the university.

Group 2: Five English teachers, who were involved in delivering the online EFL course in the school year 2015-2016, participated in semi-structured interviews. The criteria for selection were that teachers are currently employed teaching full time at the university, and have been teaching at least two EBCs. The teacher participants consisted of four females and one male. At the time of data collection, the teachers' years of English teaching ranged from 7 to 10 years. All of the teachers achieved their Master of Arts degrees in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in Vietnam.

Group 3: Three programme leaders, who were responsible for designing the content of English blended courses, agreed to participate in interviews. All of them have been teaching English for more than 10 years and had Master of Arts Degrees in TESOL.

3.6 Data collection methods

3.6.1 Online survey

3.6.1.1 Objectives of online surveys

Using surveys in second language research is very popular because of the flexibility and the ability to collect vast amounts of data quickly (Dörnyei, 2003). Recently, online surveys have become a more popular method of data collection in terms of speed, economy, convenience and simplicity (Cohen et al., 2007; Greenlaw & Brown-Welty, 2009; Neuman, 2011; Sue & Ritter, 2012). Firstly, it is fast to send an online survey to hundreds or thousands of people by just entering a distribution list and clicking the *send* button. Secondly, online surveys are cost-effective because I was able to use a free online tool such as Google Forms to create an online survey. Thirdly, online surveys are also convenient for respondents because they can complete surveys when they want, and at their own speed (Bryman, 2016). Finally, using tools such as Google Form or

SurveyMonkey to develop a survey does not require much technical expertise since these tools are user-friendly.

Given such benefits, an online survey is entirely appropriate for surveying a large group of students. This way makes it easier to gather information about participants' characteristics, experiences and opinions (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2007; B. Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Additionally, the online survey was used to identify main factors contributing to or hindering students' English learning activities using blended modes, and allowed me to develop some tentative themes that could then be explored in the follow-up interviews.

3.6.1.2 Survey items development

The online survey, developed and created using Google Forms, collected data on second-year students' perceptions and experiences of English blended courses. It consisted of 3 parts with 50 items, of which 44 were on a 5-point Likert scale, 5 were multiple-choice questions, 1 was dichotomous. Part 1 of my survey sought information on students' gender, faculty, and years of studying English. Part 2 touched on students' preferred learning devices together with their views on the usefulness of online technologies and applications and their self-reported level of digital technology proficiency. Part 3 sought to elicit students' experiences of EBCs on a variety of dimensions such as the design of EBCs, the teachers' behaviours and practices in EBCs, and the students' interactions in EBCs. The resulting online survey is summarized in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. *Descriptions of online survey for students*

Parts	**Number of items**	**Types of online survey items**	**Purposes**
Part 1	3	1 Dichotomous question 2 Multiple-choice questions	To gather demographic infomation
Part 2	10	3 Multiple-choice questions 7 Rating scales questions (5-point Likert scale: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree)	To identify internet-connected learning devices that students used most often To explore students' digital proficiency To rate the usefulness of online tools used by students
Part 3	37	37 Rating scales questions (5-point Likert scale: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree)	To find what students perceived as important factors influencing their English learning
Total items:	50		

The 37 survey items in part 3 in my study were initially adapted and modified from the WEBLEI questionnaire (see Appendix A), developed by Chang and Fisher (2003). The WEBLEI model contained 32 statements, measuring students' perceptions of any online learning environment across 4 core scales. Chang and Fisher (2003) note that Scale I (Access) is a vital factor for evaluating an online environment as this scale aims to explore the convenience, the flexibility and the freedom regarding the accessibility of the learning materials to the student. Scale II (Interaction) explores students' active participation in learning, and their "collaborative and cooperative manners" (Chang & Fisher, 2003, p. 11) when working with other students to attain the learning outcomes. Scale III (Response) focuses on students' perceptions of the online learning environment, particularly asking their general feelings when studying in a new environment as well as their feelings about achievement through this environment. Scale IV (Results) assesses whether the web-based learning materials are structured and organized following "instructional design standards such as stating its purpose, describing its scope, incorporating interactivity, and providing a variety of formats to meet different learning styles" (Chang & Fisher, 2003, p. 10). Chang and Fisher also argued

“having gone through all the learning activities, from access (Scale I) to interaction (Scale II) to response (Scale III), students should be able to determine what they have gained (Scale IV: Results) from learning in this environment” (Chang & Fisher, 2003, p. 11).

There are two reasons why the WEBLEI instrument is suitable for my study. Firstly, the WEBLEI questionnaire was designed and developed to identify students’ perceptions of online or blended learning environments. Second, this quantitative data collection instrument has been found reliable and valid by the study results from a number of researchers (Chandra, 2004; Chandra & Fisher, 2009; Chang & Fisher, 2003; Larsen, 2012). However, all of 32 items of the WEBLEI scale were then examined and selected on the basis of their relevance to my research purpose and dimensions of EBCs I aimed to explore.

Several changes/modifications were made regarding the WEBLEI scales. For example, in the Scale I (Access), I found several items whose meaning were almost similar. Therefore, several items were left out. Other changes or modifications were related to the rephrasing or rewording of questionnaire items to make them easier to understand for the participants. For example, items that used the word ‘autonomy’ in Scale II (item 3, 4) were changed to ‘freedom’, or items that referred to ‘this environment’ or ‘this learning environment’ were rephrased to ‘the blended learning environment’.

Another modification was made to the WEBLEI instrument according my research purposes. I aimed to explore students’ perception of teachers’ behaviours and practices in blended courses. Thus, I developed several items to address this using good teaching principles suggested by Chickering and Gamson (1987) (see section 2.3.3.1) as a theoretical guideline. As a result, the following items were added to the online survey:

- The teacher encouraged students to work together and help each other
- The teacher provided opportunities for me to learn in different ways
- The teacher gave me quick feedback on my work
- The teacher was ready to answer my questions

- The teacher kept students engaged in studying English during class time

Furthermore, since I aimed to explore benefits and challenges that students may experience in their EBCs, I developed more items to address these in the student online survey. I based these on the literature regarding potential benefits of using blended learning approaches and factors affecting the implementation of blended learning to develop those items. Altogether, the final survey was made of 50 items (see Appendix B for the whole survey).

3.6.2 Semi-structured interviews

Interviewing is a frequently used method for data collection (Creswell, 2012) because it is designed "to probe an interviewee's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings, and perspectives" (Wellington, 2015, p. 137). Thus, interviews are appropriate and applicable for my study since I am interested in finding out how Vietnamese students, teachers and programme leaders understand, experience and interpret the concept of blended learning; blended learning instructional principles, as well as its benefits and challenges.

There are three styles of interviewing, namely unstructured, semi-structured and structured (Wellington, 2015). In a structured interview, a researcher has a set of questions to ask all the participants and "no deviation is made from either the wording or the order of a set list of questions" (Wellington, 2015, p. 141). In a semi-structured interview, although some questions and content are organised in advance, the interviewer has flexibility and freedom to probe for more information in accordance with the context (Creswell, 2012; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). In unstructured interviews, there is no list of prepared questions, and researchers take on a more conversational approach to cover relevant topics (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010).

In order to achieve the specific aims of this study, I adopted a semi-structured interview approach. This type of interview enables participants to tell about their experiences as well as allows them to express their views and perceptions in their own words.

I used the Activity Theory system as a framework to design interview questions for students, teachers and progamme leaders. The interview questions covered different elements of the activity system including: *Subject, Tools, Rules, Community, Division of Labour* and *Object*. A range of prompting questions for each element of the activity system was also developed to help participants focus on their discussion. Interview questions explored students' own understanding of:

- Blended learning tools such as the LMS, the content and design features of blended courses
- Their roles in EBCs
- Institutional English language assessment framework
- Benefits of blended learning and the challenges they face while studying in blended environments.

The key topics in the student interview and possible eliciting questions are presented in Appendix C.

The individual interviews with teacher participants centred on the following things:

- Their own understanding of the blended learning concept, blended learning tools and blended instructional design principles
- Blended learning benefits and challenges
- The teacher training and English language assessment framework
- Their roles and responsibilities in EBCs

The semi-structured interview questions for teachers are available in Appendix D.

The interview with the programme leaders who were responsible for designing EBCs at the university covered the topics including:

- The rationale for employing blended learning in EFL education at the university
- Blended learning approaches, blended learning tools and principles for designing a blended course
- Roles of teachers and students in EBCs

- Challenges for the blended learning implementation at the university

The key topics in the programme leader interview and possible eliciting questions are presented in Appendix E.

3.7 Data collection procedures

3.7.1 Survey administration

After the parts of the online survey were completed, it was first translated into Vietnamese by myself to facilitate the responding processes of the participants as they were all native speakers of Vietnamese. Back-translation, known as 'blind translation' (Brislin, 1970) verified the translation of the questionnaire. The Vietnamese version was sent to 2 Vietnamese-English bilingual people (a Vietnamese university lecturer in Vietnam and a Vietnamese doctoral student in New Zealand) who were not exposed to the original version of the instrument. These two bilingual people's work has been associated–with lecturing EFL at university level, either currently or formerly. They were asked to back translate the Vietnamese version of the survey into English. All the differences between the original English version and the two translated English versions were carefully examined in order to produce a final version in Vietnamese. As a result of the back-translation procedure, several changes were made to both versions in terms of word choice in relation to meanings.

Items that were confusing were reworded before a pilot survey was conducted to verify that the items and procedure were well understood and that the test did not yield obvious bias effects (Dörnyei, 2003; Saris & Gallhofer, 2014). In the pilot study, the 25 participants were voluntary second-year non-English major students in Vietnam, and the pilot survey was administered as a printed version to the class. This group of participants had similar characteristics to the participants of the main study. In other words, they too are non-English major students studying English in blended learning courses. I asked this pilot group of participants to mark any problems on the survey, such as poorly worded questions, items that did not make sense, or if it took an excessive amount of time to complete the survey.

In general, the pilot trials provided valuable feedback in relation to the length of the survey, the precision of the language and word choice. Only a few amendments were made. One example of this was in the survey, the term 'English blended learning courses' was changed by 'Having both online and face-to-face components". This alteration clarified the meaning of blended learning for students. After all amendments were completed, the resulting version was the final Vietnamese version.

The online survey was then administered to the main cohort of 918 students via Google Forms, which allows for online construction and administration of surveys. The online survey was available for students to complete during 4 weeks from August to September 2017.

3.7.2 Interview data collection

Interview questions were first piloted before conducting main interviews to trial the data collection tools and to refine them for the main study (Creswell, 2012). The student interview questions were piloted with two students while the teacher interview questions were piloted with one teacher. Data from the piloting teacher and students were discarded from the data sample. The interview schedule with the programme leaders could not be piloted since all three programme leaders were selected to take part in the main study. Following the pilot interviews with students and teachers, most of the interview questions remained unchanged. Only a few changes were made regarding rephrasing questions where necessary.

I conducted the main interviews in the first semester of the academic year 2017-2018. These interviews took place between 26 September and 15 October 2017. One or two days before each interview, I contacted participants to confirm time and place for the interview. All interviews were conducted in a quiet and comfortable meeting room on the university campus to make sure that no interruptions due to noise occurred and the participants could feel comfortable to share their opinions and experiences. At the start of every interview, I always introduced the purpose of my research and attempted to build a good rapport with participants by small talks. These introductory conversations helped my

participants to feel relaxed. All interviews were audio recorded and I sometimes took notes on relevant points during the interviews. We spoke in Vietnamese so that participants could fully express their ideas. Moreover, it was also important to demonstrate active listening skills (Radnor, 2001) during the interview, and handle the interview in a sensitive and professional manner (Cohen et al., 2007). Thus, during the interviews, I focused on what participants were sharing about their experiences of blended learning and encouraged them to give examples or explanations. The length of interviews in Vietnamese ranged from 45 to 75 minutes. The Vietnamese transcripts were imported to NVivo 12 for coding and analysing; only selected excerpts from the interviews were translated into English. These were translated because they were being used in the thesis, written in English.

3.8 Data analysis process

My collected mixed methods data include responses from the online survey and interview transcripts.

3.8.1 Online survey

The quantitative data collected from the online survey were organized and analysed by The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 25. A number of statistical techniques were used. As the online survey to students was translated from English to Vietnamese, exploratory factor analysis, and tests of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the translated questionnaire were generated to show evidence of validity and reliability of the measure in this research

I used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for grouping together variables that have something in common (i.e they correlate). Each group of variables is then called a *factor* and the variables constituting each factor are thought to be measuring the same underlying construct (Field, 2013). The general procedure for conducting factor analysis in my study consists of three main steps including initial analysis, main analysis and post analysis, as illustrated in Figure 3.4.

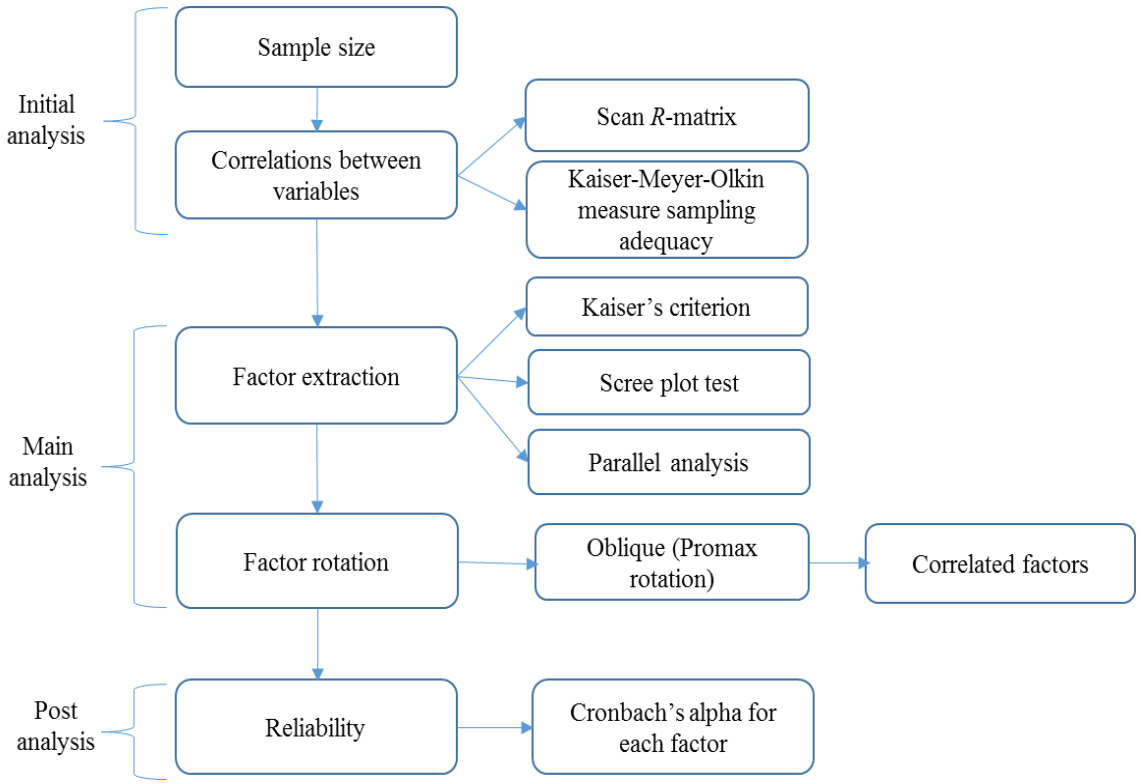


Figure 3.4. Steps for factor analysis in my study

a) Initial analysis

The purpose of the initial analysis phase is to check the suitability of the data for factor analysis. There are two main issues to consider in determining whether a particular dataset is suitable for factor analysis: sample size and correlations between variables.

Firstly, the reliability of factor analysis will depend on sample size. While there has been little agreement on how large a sample size is adequate for factors to be analysed, it is recommended that the larger the sample size is, the more reliable the factor solution is (Pallant, 2016). Costello and Osborne (2011) indicate that a ratio of five cases to one item is adequate, a ratio of 10 cases to one item is good, and a ratio of 20 cases to one item is very good. Comrey and Lee (1992) class 300 as a good sample size, 100 as poor and 1000 as excellent. Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) also suggest that having at least 300 cases is good. Thus, the sample size

of the present study (*N*=339) was good for the factor analysis of 37 items of the online survey (approximately a 10 to 1 ratio).

Secondly, correlations between variables need to be addressed. Following Tabachnick's and Fidell's recommendation, I scanned the correlation matrix of all variables for evidence of coefficients greater than .3. Factor analysis is deemed inappropriate if few correlations above .3 are found (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The correlation matrix of the sample (Table 3.2) yielded evidence for its factorability when there are a lot of correlation coefficients of .3 and above.

Table 3.2. *An extract from Correlation matrix between 37 items of the online student survey*

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	I could access the learning activities whenever I want.	1									
2	I could work at my own speed to achieve learning objectives.	.320**	1								
3	I could decide how much I wanted to learn in a given period.	.239**	.479**	1							
4	I communicated with other students in this course electronically (email, bulletin boards, chat room).	.230**	.311**	.350**	1						
5	I had to be self-disciplined in order to learn.	.283**	.316**	.379**	.354**	1					
6	I had the freedom to ask my teacher what I did not understand.	.368**	.239**	.189**	.333**	.322**	1				
7	I had the freedom to ask other students what I did not understand.	.236**	.271**	.278**	.345**	.257**	.561**	1			
8	Other students responded promptly to my requests for help.	.223**	.228**	.255**	.354**	.245**	.435**	.637**	1		
9	I was regularly asked to evaluate my own work.	.188**	.146**	.208**	.376**	.181**	.443**	.364**	.397**	1	
10	My classmates and I were asked to evaluate each other's work.	.166**	.169**	.182**	.365**	.170**	.381**	.341**	.359**	.682**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Moreover, two other statistical measures are also generated to help assess the appropriate usage of factor analysis for the sample: Kaiser Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) (Kaiser, 1970) and Bartlett's test of sphericity (Bartlett, 1954). The KMO index "represents the ratio of the squared correlation between variables to the squared partial correlation between variable" (Field, 2013, p. 684). The KMO index varies between 0 and 1, with .6 recommended as the minimum value for a good factor analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity tests the correlation between variables, and should be significant (p<.05) for the factor analysis to be considered suitable (Cohen et al., 2011; Pallant, 2016). As presented in Table 3.3, the KMO index of the sample was .924, exceeding the recommended value of .6 (Kaiser, 1970) and Bartlett's

Test was significant (p=.000 < .05); therefore, factor analysis was appropriate for the sample.

Table 3.3. *KMO and Bartlett's Test of the sample*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.924
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	8403.113
	df	666
	Sig.	0.000

b) Main analysis

The main analysis phase involves factor extraction and factor rotation.

Factor extraction

The purpose of factor extraction is to determine the smallest number of factors that can be used to best present the underlying relationships among the sets of variables (Pallant, 2016). Also, determining the number of factors needs close attention because more or fewer factors than necessary will lead to serious errors that affect results (Comrey & Lee, 1992; O'Connor, 2000). Thus, I used different techniques such as Kaiser's criterion, scree test and parallel analysis to determine the number of factors to be retained.

Firstly, Kaiser's criterion, known as the eigenvalue rule, recommended retaining all factors with large eigenvalues (greater than 1) for further investigation (Kaiser, 1960) because "the eigenvalue of a factor represents the amount of the total variance explained by that factor" (Pallant, 2016, p. 185). In other words, eigenvalues indicate "the substantive importance of the factors" (Field, 2013, p. 676).

Table 3.4 partially shows the output of factor analysis with 37 items on my online survey (for the complete data, see Appendix F). As can be seen in the table, factor analysis revealed the presence of seven factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1 (13.393, 3.525, 2.587, 1.601, 1.460, 1.291, and 1.094). These seven factors explain a total of 67.438 percent of the variance (see Cumulative % column).

Table 3.4. *An extract of the total variance explained when 37 items were included*

Total Variance Explained						
Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	13.393	36.198	36.198	13.033	35.225	35.225
2	3.525	9.527	45.726	3.118	8.427	43.653
3	2.587	6.992	52.718	2.169	5.862	49.515
4	1.601	4.326	57.044	1.233	3.332	52.847
5	1.460	3.947	60.991	1.127	3.046	55.893
6	1.291	3.489	64.480	0.843	2.278	58.171
7	1.094	2.958	67.438	0.700	1.892	60.063
8	0.942	2.547	69.985			
9	0.839	2.267	72.252			
10	0.782	2.113	74.365			
35	0.152	0.41	99.315			
36	0.135	0.366	99.681			
37	0.118	0.319	100.00			

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.

It is acceptable to retain all factors eigenvalues above 1 using Kaiser's criterion, however, Kaiser's criterion has often been criticized to overestimate the number of factors in the data set (Pallant, 2016; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). To avoid over-extraction of factors which might result in "researchers' attributing excessive substantive importance to trivial factors" (O'Connor, 2000, p. 396). I examined a second criterion - the scree test (Cattell, 1966) - to confirm whether an eigenvalue is large enough to present a meaningful factor.

A scree plot test graphed each eigenvalue (*Y*-axis) against the factor to which it is related (*X*-axis) to get an estimate of the number of factors for the sample. By plotting the eigenvalues in a graph, the relative importance of each factor might become clear. The number of factors selected depends upon the number of

eigenvalues on the curve to the left of the scree plot that could either include or exclude the factor at the point of inflexion (Cattell, 1966; Cohen et al., 2007). An examination of the scree plot of the sample (Figure 3.5) revealed a clear break after the third factor; however, there was also another little break after the seventh factor, which caused confusion for me to decide on how many factors should be retained: either thee-factor solution or seven-factor solution. Additionally, because the scree test involves researchers' "eyeball searches of plots" (O'Connor, 2000, p. 396) to find where the discontinuity in eigenvalues occurs, it may lead to subjective and not exact decisions. Therefore, it is worth examining another approach to decide how many factors to be extracted for the data sample.

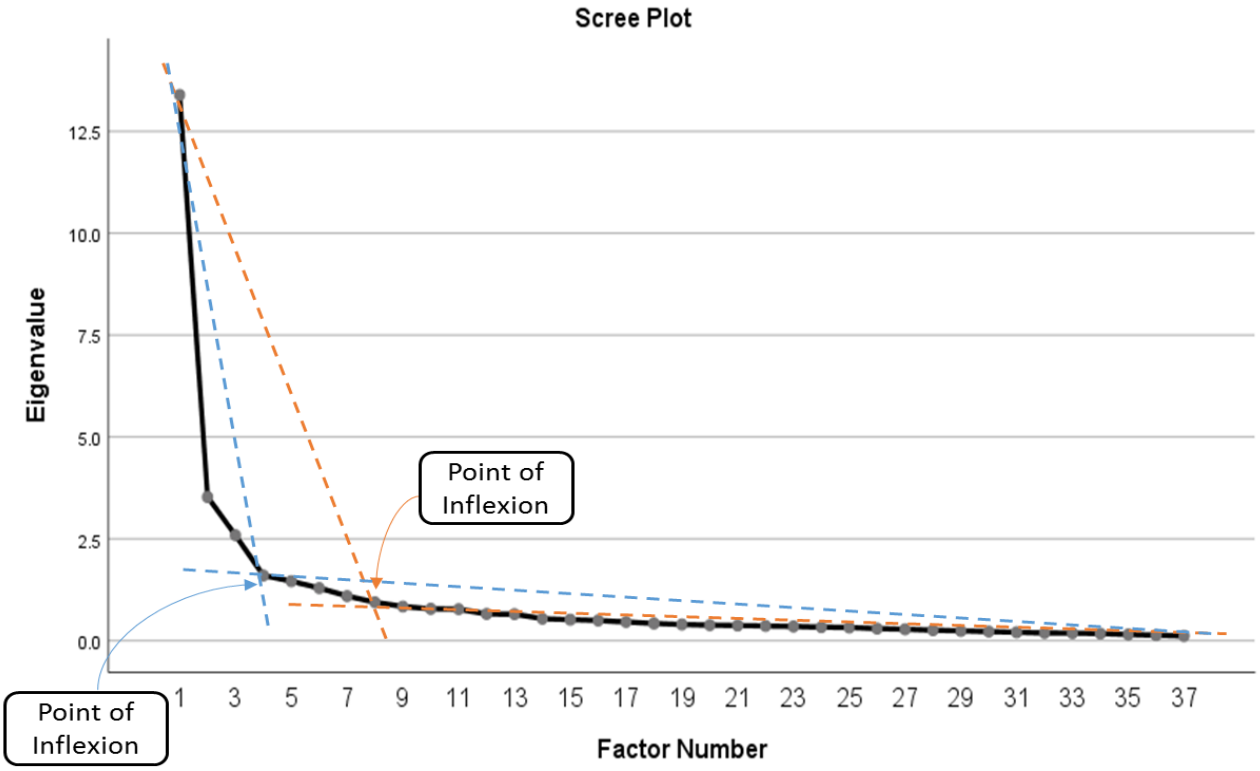


Figure 3.5. Scree plot test with Eigenvalues

Next, I examined another approach, Horn's parallel analysis (Horn, 1965), to decide the number of factors. Parallel analysis involves the comparison of eigenvalues of the actual data to those obtained from a randomly generated data set (Pallant, 2016, p. 185). Only factors from the real dataset whose eigenvalues exceed the corresponding values from the random data set are retained (Pallant,

2016; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The actual data and the random data underwent parallel analysis through a syntax written in SPSS. The results of EFA and parallel analysis are presented in Table 3.5

Table 3.5. *Comparison of actual eigenvalues from EFA and random eigenvalues from parallel analysis*

Factor	Actual eigenvalue from EFA	Random eigenvalue from parallel analysis	Decision
1	**13.393**	**1.6865**	**accept**
2	**3.525**	**1.6005**	**accept**
3	**2.587**	**1.5415**	**accept**
4	**1.601**	**1.4865**	**accept**
5	**1.460**	**1.4383**	**accept**
6	1.291	1.3967	reject
7	1.094	1.3534	reject
8	.942	1.3127	reject

As can be seen in Table 3.5, the results of parallel analysis show only five factors with eigenvalues in the actual data exceeding the corresponding eigenvalues in the random data. For example, the eigenvalue of the first factor in the actual data is 13.393, while it is 1.6865 in the random data. The eigenvalue of the second factor in the actual data is 3.525, whereas it is 1.6005 in the random data. However, the case is different when looking at factor six because the eigenvalue of factor six in the random data is higher than that of the actual data (1.3967>1.291). This case is considered as the point at which parallel analysis suggests a decision on the number of factors to be retained, which is a five-factor solution.

In short, the number of factors suggested by Kaiser's criterion or scree test do not correspond to the number of factors obtained from the parallel analysis method. Given some limitations of Kaiser's criterion such as an overestimate of the number of factors (O'Connor, 2000; Zwick & Velicer, 1986) and scree test's involvement in researchers' subjective judgement on the point of inflexion (O'Connor, 2000),

parallel analysis has been shown to be the most accurate technique to determine the number of factors (Hubbard & Allen, 1987; O'Connor, 2000). Therefore, I decided to rely on the results of the parallel analysis to retain five factors for further analysis.

Factor rotation

After determining the number of factors, the next step is to choose an appropriate factor rotation to help interpret each of the factors more easily. There are two main rotational approaches: orthogonal and oblique rotation. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), in orthogonal rotation, factors are unrelated to one another while in oblique rotation, factors might be related to one another. Thus, in order to adopt an appropriate rotation method to interpret five factors, it was necessary to understand the relationship among these factors. In my study, I assumed that aspects of learners' views of their English blended courses might be correlated with one another, so I selected an oblique solution using Promax rotation technique to improve the interpretability of the five-factor solution.

After choosing a five-factor solution and Promax rotation to aid in the interpretation of these five factors. I conducted the factor analysis specifying that SPSS extracts 5 factors. The first factor analysis with Promax rotation (see Appendix G) indicated a simple factor structure with no item cross loading on more than one factor (loading cut-off above 0.50). Nine items with factor loadings smaller than 0.5 were removed, then the factor analysis with Promax rotation was run again with the 28 remaining items. Table 3.6 delineates the factor loadings on five factors and the total variance explained for each factor. Items are ordered and grouped by size of loadings to facilitate interpretation.

Table 3.6. *Pattern Matrix for Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation of 28 items*

	Factors				
Factors and Items	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Factor 1: Content and design features					
The learning objectives were clearly stated in each class lesson.	**.906**	-.028	.035	.023	-.057
Expectations of online tasks were clearly stated.	**.900**	-.069	-.001	.099	-.141
Expectations of classroom tasks were clearly stated.	**.859**	-.019	.020	.053	-.074
The organization of each online lesson was easy to follow.	**.855**	.016	-.038	.050	-.158
The organization of each classroom lesson is easy to follow.	**.725**	.039	.018	.073	-.016
The presentation of the English course content was clear.	**.647**	.173	.014	-.166	.196
The content of the English courses was appropriate for delivery in a blended learning environment.	**.563**	.067	.027	-.166	.383
There was a good balance between online and classroom activities.	**.554**	-.018	.049	-.067	.299
The online and classroom activities worked well together.	**.551**	.125	-.044	.027	.135
Factor 2: Teachers' roles					
The teacher was ready to answer my questions.	.049	**.893**	-.093	-.003	-.063
The teacher gave me quick feedback on my work.	-.082	**.799**	.040	.153	-.010
The teacher provided opportunities for me to learn in different ways.	.136	**.786**	.049	.022	-.081
The teacher encouraged students to work together and help each other.	.158	**.756**	-.045	-.098	.003
The teacher kept students engaged in studying English during class time.	.003	**.754**	.044	.029	.057
Factor 3: Challenges of blended learning					
I felt isolated during my English courses at the university.	.028	-.138	**.801**	.036	-.102
I felt anxious in my English courses at the university.	-.024	.052	**.766**	-.013	.058
I faced difficulties in managing my time in my English courses at the university.	.005	.027	**.766**	.050	.000
I was overwhelmed with information and resources in my English courses at the university.	.147	.062	**.722**	-.036	-.006
I had difficulties in using digital technologies in my English courses at the university.	-.082	-.020	**.682**	-.029	.011
Factor 4: Classroom norms					
I was regularly asked to evaluate my own work.	-.072	.106	.149	**.662**	.043
I had the freedom to ask other students what I did not understand.	.174	-.039	-.101	**.657**	-.037
Other students responded promptly to my requests for help.	.136	-.082	-.048	**.644**	.014
My classmates and I were asked to evaluate each other's work.	-.141	.061	.138	**.632**	.100
I had the freedom to ask my teacher what I did not understand.	.016	.099	-.138	**.581**	.062
Factor 5: Benefits of blended learning					
The blended learning environment made me motivated to learn English.	-.101	-.009	-.003	-.015	**.985**
The blended learning environment kept me engaged in studying English.	-.013	.002	.006	.014	**.867**
I felt a sense of satisfaction about the blended learning environment.	.083	-.095	-.017	.266	**.617**
It was easy to work together with other students involved in group work in the blended learning environment.	.060	-.034	0.047	.168	**.603**
Percent of variance explained: 68.881	38.653	12.017	8.197	5.422	4.592

Note: major loadings for each item are bolded

In sum, table 3.6 shows that five-factor solution explained 68.881 percent of the total variance. Five factors accounted for 38.653, 12.017, 8.197, 5.422 and 4.592 percent of the total variance respectively. All items included in factor analysis had loadings in excess of .55 (see major loadings bolded), which are considered good for interpreting the unique relationship between the factor and the items.

The five factors in relation to students' views of English blended courses were then named to characterize a factor. I reviewed and articulated the accumulated meanings of all items in each respective factor to make sure that the factor names demonstrated the distinction of one factor from another. The nine items loading on Factor 1 mentioned students' perceptions of EBCs' organizations, instructions and activities. Thus, the first factor was called *Content and design features.* Factor 2 consisted of 5 items associated with students' perceptions of teachers' activities, attitudes and behaviours in EBCs, so this factor was labelled *Teachers' roles.* Factor 3 included 5 items in relation to challenges and difficulties faced by students when they studied in EBCs. Hence, it was named *Challenges of blended learning.* Factor 4 comprised 5 items associated with students' cooperation and interaction in English classes, and I named this factor as *Classroom norms*. The last factor was labelled as *Benefits of blended learning* because all 4 items in this factor pertained to benefits of studying English in a blended environment such as improving students' motivation and engagement in studying English.

c) Post analysis

After naming the factors, the internal consistency of items in each factor was examined to maximize the consistency level of each factor. Cronbach's alpha coefficient is one of the most commonly used indices of internal consistency. DeVellis (2017) suggests that the Cronbach alpha coefficient of a scale should be above .7 and values above .8 are preferable. As summarized in Table 3.7, the Cronbach's alpha values for the five identified factors were .935, .918, .862, .808, and .891, respectively, exceeding .8, showing a good internal consistency reliability for each factor with the data sample.

Table 3.7. *Internal consistency of the five factor scales*

Factors	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Factor 1: Content and design features	9	.935
Factor 2: Teachers' roles	5	.918
Factor 3: Challenges of blended learning	5	.862
Factor 4: Classroom norms	5	.808
Factor 5: Benefits of blended learning	4	.891

In short, the internal consistency of all five factors was highly reliable with the alpha coefficients ranged from .808 to .935, allowing them to be retained for further analyses. Hence, all of these five factors were considered as the key factors students perceived as having influence on their learning of English in a blended environment. The interpretation of these key factors is presented in section 5.2.2, Chapter 5.

3.8.2 Semi-structured interviews

Qualitative data included transcripts from individual interviews. The aim of analysis of qualitative data is to work with raw data and identify conceptual meanings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The process of data analysis, which begins with the categorisation and organisation of data in search of patterns and themes that emerge from raw data, is known as thematic analysis (Mutch, 2005).

Firstly, familiarisation with data was achieved through the transcription process of the interviews. I listened to audio interview recordings several times for accurate transcription. Secondly, Vietnamese transcripts and audio recordings were imported into Nvivo 12 to generate codes in interview data. This software helped me to organize data in different categories and manage data sources.

During this process, I followed a coding regime introduced by Strauss and Corbin (1990), which involves developing open, axial and selective codes. During the open coding stage, I broke data into manageable units and examined them for similarities and differences, followed by categorizing these data units. In the axial coding stage, I intensively analysed the categories of identified codes to discover

the relationships amongst codes, family of codes and sub-family of codes. Selective coding is the final stage in the coding process, in which I systematically integrated all codes in the way that it can be understood by readers.

The next stage was the theme development. At this stage, coded nodes were reread to identify potential themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that a theme is "something which captures the key idea about the data in relation to the research question and which represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). The data were coded both deductively and inductively, with the *mother nodes* or general categories derived from the methodological frameworks and research questions; *child nodes* or subcategories were developed from the interpretation of the selected text segments. The *coded nodes* were then re-examined and reduced. Nodes with similar meaning were merged and nodes with closely related meaning were grouped together and coded into more general nodes. All general nodes were then mapped on to the elements of Activity Theory Framework. Figure 3.6 below demonstrates the hierarchy of main themes and tree nodes.

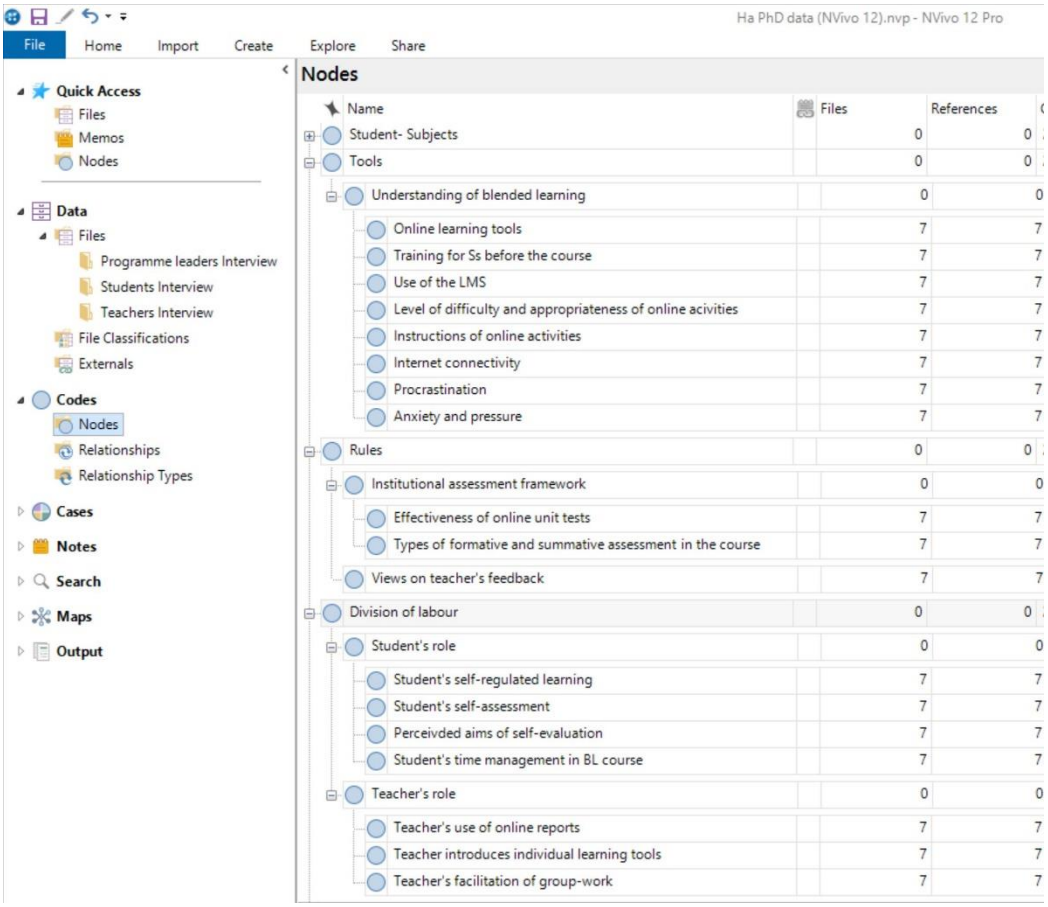


Figure 3.6. Example of node folders

In short, I have explained the systematic approach that was taken to gather and analyse both the quantitative and qualitative data. The data analysis process of quantitative data revealed five main factors that students perceived as having influence on their English learning experience, while the analysis of interview data provided deeper understanding of blended learning experience of students, programme leaders and teachers. These findings are presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

3.9 Positioning the researcher

I collected data as an insider researcher since my study explored elements within my university context affecting the teaching and learning of English in a blended environment.

There are several advantages of being an insider researcher. For example, I have a deeper understanding of the cultural factors of the research setting and have a good relationship with administrators, lecturers and staff there, which helped me approach research participants easily. However, I am fully aware of some problems associated with being an insider. I am conscious that my over-familiarity with the university may lead me to some biases, which may prevent me from seeing all the dimensions of the bigger picture while collecting data (Sike & Potts, 2008; Smyth & Holian, 2008). In this case, I attempted to minimise potential biases by careful attention to participation feedback and the initial evaluation of data. I also used triangulation in the methods of gathering data to collect the data without judgement as much as I could. Additionally, according to Rooney (2005), one strategy to mitigate the influence of biases is to ask for help from an external academic advisor. In my case, I discussed with my three supervisors about ways to make my research process as transparent as possible and how to clarify the researcher role while writing the thesis.

As an insider researcher, I may also confront the issue of role duality (Sike & Potts, 2008; Smyth & Holian, 2008). For instance, research participants may view me as a teacher or a course inspector, as before starting my PhD research I was known as an English teacher and a designer of blended courses at the university. To mitigate this potential problem, I informed participants of the nature of my research (Burke & Kirton, 2006), and my role as researcher.

Furthermore, I understand that participants who are my good friends sometimes showed their over enthusiasm to my research. For example, they may have said something that they assumed that I wanted to hear, which may negatively influence the validity of the data. Thus, during the interview process, this influence was minimized with my understanding of their personality and my careful consideration to facilitate the interactions between us.

3.10 Ethical considerations

As the current study involved human subjects, a number of ethical issues were considered. Prior to conducting this research, I submitted an ethics application to

the University of Waikato Ethics Committee, which was approved, and obtained a formal written permission from the Rector to conduct the research from the university in Vietnam.

After gaining approval to access the research site and the participants from the Rector, I emailed three potential programme leaders and seven teacher participants to invite them to participate in the research. All three programme leaders agreed to participate in my research while only five teachers agreed doing so. The letter of information and consent forms are in Appendix H and Appendix I.

It is necessary to note that ethics has not been part of the research culture in Vietnam. Thus, most participants had no prior knowledge of the importance of consent when participating in educational research. They, therefore, felt surprised to receive the consent form. For Vietnamese, signing a consent form is understood to mean undertaking some duty. However, the study consent form was to protect participants' rights rather than force them to do something. Therefore, a detailed explanation was always given to the participants and related parties when it came to the issues of ethics.

All communications relating to the data collection process were given in Vietnamese to ensure the comprehension of those involved. All of the participants understood that their participation in the study was voluntary; and that it would not have any effect on their English teaching or learning. They were also fully informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, and withdraw their data up until analysis commenced. Once analysis began, their data may not be withdrawn. However, for participants of the online survey, completion of the anonymous survey indicates consent.

I was also mindful of protecting the participants from potential harm arising from the exposure of perceptions or practices that could potentially affect the professional reputation of participants. For example, if participants said something not good about the blended learning programmes or institutional policies, the institution may react against that, potentially giving them a negative evaluation or even withholding their chance of promotion. Therefore, all information collected

was protected and kept confidential, and the data will only be used for the PhD thesis, journal articles or conference presentations. The completed PhD thesis will be made available on the internet by the University of Waikato. Only my supervisors and I can access the raw data and information about my research, and this will not be shared with any other external party. In reporting data in any form, pseudonyms have been used throughout including the name of the university, and participants' names. Thus, the participants are unlikely to be identified by any references made in the research. Moreover, I attempted to report the findings constructively to minimize possible harm to both my institution reputation and participants' careers but still ensured the integrity of the research.

3.11 Maintaining trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the term used in research to describe the quality of research. In quantitative research, this term means that the researcher needs to convince the reader that the study is valid and reliable. Meanwhile, in qualitative research, trustworthiness involves ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To improve the trustworthiness of this study, I used several strategies.

For the quantitative aspect, the online survey was subject to validity checks through content validation and piloting. I also used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and Cronbach's alpha as methods to ensure the reliability of the online survey. EFA is a particular factor analysis method used to identify clusters of variables statistically into common factors (Field, 2018), and examine the relationships among variables without determining a particular hypothetical model (Bryman & Cramer, 2011). The variables that were more correlated with those in one group and less correlated with those in the other groups should be grouped together to constitute a construct (Cohen, et al., 2007; Field, 2018). Cronbach's alpha is the most frequently used measure of internal consistency in questionnaire research (J. D. Brown, 2001). The high level of Cronbach's alpha indicates a reliable instrument of the measured construct.

The items of the online survey to students in this research were both adapted from prior research and newly developed. The survey included 50 items, reflecting different dimensions of students' perceptions and experiences of EBCs. Therefore, EFA was an appropriate reliability test to arrange these items into groups, indicating only the important factors/dimensions perceived by the study sample. Moreover, once the prominent factors were formed by using EFA, the Cronbach's alpha of each dimension was calculated to check the reliability of each scale.

For the qualitative aspect, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility (or internal validity) depends heavily on member checking into the findings, which is gaining feedback on the data, interpretations and conclusions from the participants. In my case, full transcriptions of interview records were given to participants for accuracy, verification and comments on the content.

Triangulation is another strategy for enhancing credibility in qualitative research, which involves collecting data from multiple sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As mentioned by Denzin (1989), there are four types or methods of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and method triangulation. For this study, following Denzin's triangulation types, I employed data and method triangulation. Specifically, I collected data from different participants (students, teachers, programme leaders) (data triangulation) by means of semi-structured interviews, and an online survey (method triangulation).

Transferability refers to whether the findings of the study can be generalised or transferred to other contexts (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Transferability involves the researcher's responsibility to provide evidence that "makes transferability judgements possible on the part of potential appliers" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 136). Thus, to enhance transferability, I have provided a comprehensive description (within ethical constraints) of the research design, research context, participants, data gathering process, and research methods to help readers for making the decision on transferability to their particular contexts.

Dependability relates to "the stability of findings overtime" (Bitsch, 2005, p. 86). Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that dependability can be established using an audit trail, which involves an examination of the inquiry process and product to validate the data. As suggested by Bryman (2016), it is important to keep a detailed record of the research process such as shaping a research question, selecting participants, interviewing participants, transcribing and analysing data to audit the inquiry process. Thus, in my case, an auditing approach was applied. I stored, organized and saved all data including online survey responses, interview recordings, transcriptions and translations, as well as other documents such as ethical forms and writing drafts in my laptop. By doing this, I can review data if necessary.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings could be confirmed or corroborated by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability involves the degree of neutrality in the findings of the research (Sarantakos, 2005). This means that the findings are based on participants' responses, rather than on the researcher's beliefs, assumptions and judgements. Denscombe (2014) and Cohen et al. (2018) both emphasize that interviewer bias and misinterpretation of responses are major threats in qualitative research. The researcher bias can come from a "tendency for the interviewer to seek answers that support for her preconceived notions or theory" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108). In other words, researchers find what they want to find, and then report the result (B. Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Thus, triangulation and researcher reflexivity were used to reduce the effect of such researcher bias.

Moreover, Fowler (2009) asserts that interviewees typically provide socially desirable responses to questions to please the interviewer or to not appear different from what is socially acceptable. Thus, those answers might not be valid and also probably "what people say rather than what people do" (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996, p. 13). In order to reduce such bias, I carefully formulated interview questions so that the meaning is clear and understandable. Prior to the data collection, questions for the semi-structured interview were trialled on several respondents to check if interview questions are clear, understandable and capable of answering the research questions. The feedback was used to make

changes to my questions. During the interview, I probed or asked for further explanation when interviewees gave incomplete or ambiguous responses; or when I observed that the answer was perhaps *what people say rather than what people do*. Member checking technique (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was also employed to address the interviewer bias and ensure the validity of qualitative data. The transcripts were sent back to all participants for validation. After that, I analysed data carefully to achieve accuracy.

3.12 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined my philosophical assumptions explaining my approach to this research. These assumptions are associated with my ontology, epistemology, and my choice of pragmatism as a research paradigm. I used mixed methods design and Activity Theory as an analytical framework to explore factors affecting the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning approach in the Vietnamese context. Data were mainly collected through a student online survey and semi-structured interviews with students, programme leaders, and teachers. This chapter also discussed ethical issues, my experience as an insider researcher as well as strategies for enhancing the trustworthiness of the study.

The next two chapters present the findings of this research.

CHAPTER FOUR: STAFF PERSPECTIVES OF ENGLISH BLENDED COURSES

4.1 Introduction

The findings are presented as two separate chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on staff (programme leader and teacher) perspectives of English blended courses (EBCs), while Chapter 5 reports on student perspectives. This chapter, in two sections, presents findings about programme leaders' and teachers' perspectives regarding different aspects of EBCs through the lens of Activity Theory. Each section is divided into key themes that organize the findings according to Activity Theory elements such as *Tools, Objects, Rules, Division of Labour, and Outcomes*. It is important to note that Activity Theory elements are not intended to be understood as discrete and separate entities. This is because data are integrated across Activity Theory elements, and need to be read and understood as connected, rather than isolated.

4.2 Programme leaders' perspectives of English blended courses

This section reports on the qualitative findings of interviews with three programme leaders (PLs) about their role in designing EBCs for students of a faculty at their institution. All three PLs had Master of Arts degrees in TESOL, and have been teaching English for more than ten years. None of them have instructional design qualifications. The following figure (Figure 4.1) represents the Activity Theory framework applied to the PLs' design activity of EBCs.

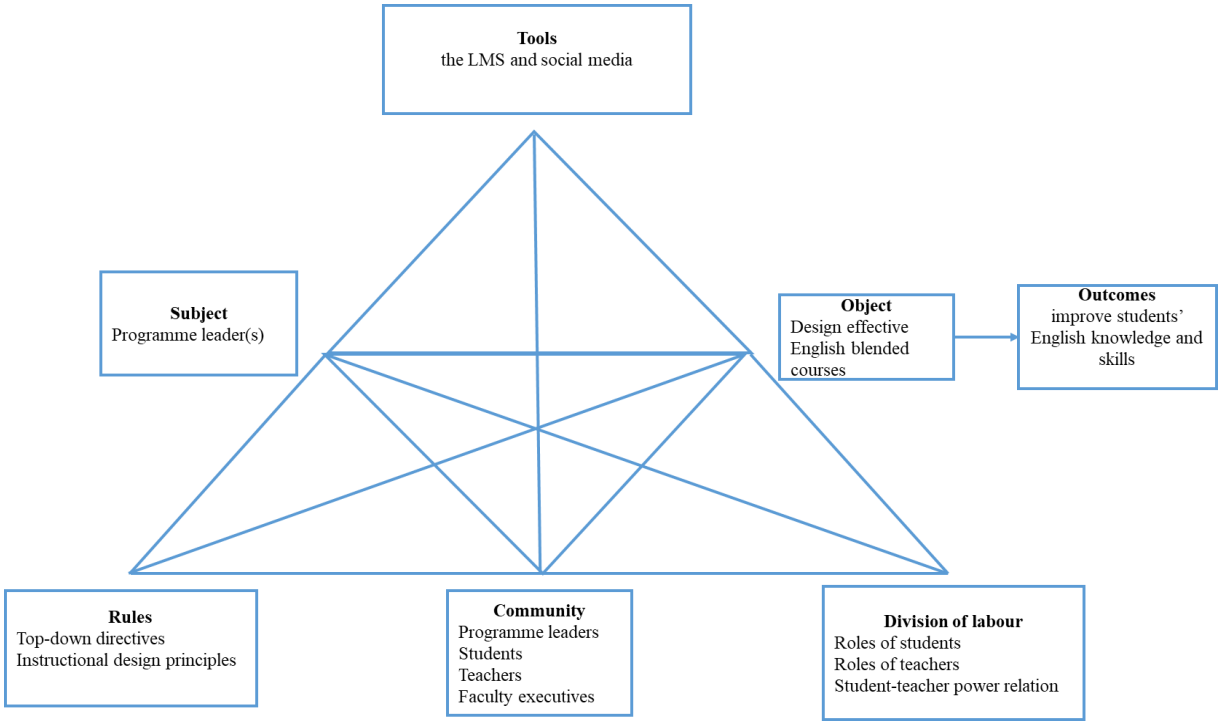


Figure 4.1. Programme leaders' design activity system

Five main components of the PLs' designing activity are discussed in turn: *Tools, Object, Rules, Division of labour* and *Outcomes*.

4.2.1 Tools

Data show that the PLs perceived the use of blended learning tools such as the Learning management system (LMS) and social media as having mediational roles in English teaching and learning. For example, Mai stated:

> Technology plays an important role in students' English learning because the university LMS helps transfer teachers' instructional ideas and offer students rich learning resources. Moreover, other online tools such as Facebook or Messenger help increase student-student interaction as well as student-teacher interaction in the courses [blended courses] (Mai, programme leader 3).

As noted in Mai's comment, the LMS at her institution had advantages in making the learning content, materials and resources available to students; however, the LMS structure appears not to incorporate interactive tools to afford adequate and effective human-human interaction in the EBCs. Instead, teachers and students in

the EBCs communicated to each other outside the LMS, specifically used social media.

Another programme leader, Minh, commented that some affordances of the LMS tools such as automated feedback, accessibility and reusability could mediate the relationship between students and knowledge, saying:

> The role of technology is important when students mainly study online and face a computer screen. Students will interact much with computers so the advanced technology such as LMS helps give automated feedback to students and make them engaged in online learning activities. Additionally, the LMS fosters students' independent learning when students can access online learning activities at any time, and can redo them [online learning activities] as much as they want. (Minh, programme leader 2).

Minh's quote suggests that the LMS as a tool encouraged students to independently access the subject knowledge.

Briefly, the PLs viewed the LMS as a mediational tool that is intended to transmit knowledge, provide learning resources and enhance students' learning role. The PLs also considered social media as facilitating students' communication and interactivity in EBCs. It appears that the current LMS model operates in a teacher-centric manner because it primarily helped teachers to deliver content knowledge and distribute teaching resources rather than creating a space for students to discuss and share knowledge.

4.2.2 Object

According to the PLs, the driver for their design of EBCs was their positive belief of blended learning as an innovative method of English teaching and learning, even though the institution itself did not have a clear vision and guidelines about the purposes of blended learning and its adoption. For example, Minh said:

> I remembered that I was not clearly introduced to the objectives of the blended learning adoption from the beginning. We [teachers] were required to apply the blended learning approach from the faculty executives and we did it…However, blended learning is a good trend to follow for the university as I think it is an innovative method of teaching and learning. (Minh, programme leader 2)

Minh (programme leader 2) also believed that in Vietnam, blended classes are "totally different" from traditional, face-to-face English classes. She sees the traditional classes as having teachers in the role of "knowledge transmitters", while students had to "go to class to study". She points out that in her view, lessons are more "vivid and engaging" in blended classes as a result of using technology such as “images and sounds”. She also seems to suggest that benefits of blended learning over traditional face-to-face class include supporting “learners at different ages and statuses, with diverse needs and learning styles” such as “working people”. After that, Minh appears to view blended learning as a model of innovations, helping to “improve the education quality” as a result of changing methods of teaching and learning.

The lack of guidelines about the adoption of blended learning from the institution was also remarked on by Hoa, another programme leader. She noted, “I did not receive any official documents about the reasons or the aims of the adoption of blended learning approach from the institutional level”. Nevertheless, Hoa pointed out a number of benefits of implementing a blended learning approach to the teaching of English. She commented:

> Students are so bored with having to be cramped with knowledge of grammar rules and reading in traditional English classes. Therefore, when all knowledge of grammar and vocabulary will be delivered online, students will have more time to practice speaking in face-to-face class. As a result, their English speaking ability can be improved much. In addition, blended learning can motivate students to learn grammar and vocabulary and enhance their independent learning. That’s why blended learning is an innovative teaching trend and should be carried out at our university. (Hoa, programme leader 1)

Hoa appears to suggest that studying English grammar and vocabulary lessons online might help break the tedium normally experienced with such lessons in a traditional classroom setting. Moreover, Hoa seems to perceive that the blended learning model would enable students to be more autonomous.

Overall, data in this regard revealed that the participant PLs held positive perceptions of blended learning as an innovative method of learning due to its

potentials for improving students' learning experience and encouraging students' active learning.

4.2.3 Rules

Rules focus here on two aspects that regulate the process of designing blended courses including: top-down directives for designing blended courses; and the PLs' understandings of instructional design principles.

4.2.3.1 Top-down directives for designing blended courses

The PLs reported that during the pre-design stage they generally felt confused and worried because they did not receive specific institutional guidelines for designing a blended learning course, and they had limited course design experience. Two examples that demonstrate this are as follows:

> When being told about developing the blended learning curriculum for the first time, I felt like I didn't know where to start and how to do it. The Dean of the faculty also told me about the blended learning approach. However, I still only had little understanding about curriculum design. (Hoa, programme leader 1)

> When being asked to be a programme leader, I had very limited understanding of a language course design. The university first employed the blended learning approach with the cooperation of two external online service providers several years ago, but that programme appeared to be ineffective and stopped. Therefore, when blended learning was reintroduced in 2015, I was so worried whether blended learning can work well or not. No training of how to design a course was given at that time. (Mai, programme leader 3)

The PLs appeared to acknowledge that they lacked understanding, and experience in course design and were not given professional development regarding blended learning implementation from their institution. Their comments also imply that the blended learning design was a top-down and centralized process, which was expected by the university administration.

4.2.3.2 Instructional design principles

All participants reported that they did not know principles for designing blended courses, and they started designing blended courses based on their own experience

and following a directive from the faculty executive. That is, they were required to write a course map for six consecutive English courses, which would be delivered to students of three faculties over six semesters. To achieve this, each of the PLs carried out a needs analysis to decide what subject matter should be included in six consecutive courses for students of a faculty. For example, Mai commented:

> Before designing the course content outlines and learning activities for students of faculty A, I conducted a needs analysis to decide topics to be covered in six English courses. I interviewed former students about their experience of situations at their workplace. I also asked the subject content teachers about what academic knowledge is important for the major of the students. Based on the results of needs analysis, themes were then compiled for the courses. (Mai, programme leader 3)

The participants also explained their conceptual understandings regarding reasons for choosing language items and language skills to be covered in blended courses. Hoa clarified:

> When starting designing, I used the course map for the programme, which was written based on the results of needs analysis, to develop online and face-to-face materials. Then based on the identified themes, I chose vocabulary lists, grammar and drilling activities for reading, listening and writing skills which will be delivered via the LMS at the university. After that, speaking activities in class will be designed to help revise and practice knowledge which is delivered online. (Hoa, programme leader 1).

Similarly, Mai (programme leader 3) described her principles for deciding what tasks/activities would be taught in blended courses, saying:

> First, I selected knowledge and topics for the courses based on the needs analysis and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages-an international standard for describing language ability. Then the learning activities are selected in alignment with the learning objectives of the course. All English knowledge and practice of vocabulary, grammar and language skills such as listening, reading and writing skills will be delivered via the LMS while face-to-face classes focus on the revision of English knowledge and improving English speaking skills.

Moreover, Minh emphasized the importance of defining the course learning goals and designing engaging learning activities in blended courses. She said:

> I think learning objectives of a course are important and need to be made clear at the planning stage of the designing process. Online and face-to-face activities need to be designed to help students to achieve stated

> learning objectives from easy to difficult levels (Minh, programme leader 2)

The above extracts suggest that the PLs used the needs analysis stage to identify the learning content and learning objectives and to select the mix of learning activities and learning resources.

All three PLs further noted that the design of the courses was directed by the faculty executive. That is the online components covered the subject matters while the face-to-face components were aimed at students' practice of the target language. What follows is a common response from my participants:

> Following the directives from the university, all English knowledge was delivered online, and all skills of reading, listening and writing were also taught online via the university LMS. However, the website now still lacks online lectures and a chat room. The purpose of the face-to-face part is to consolidate the delivered content knowledge and to develop speaking skills. (Hoa, programme leader 1)

From the above comment, Hoa appears to design EBCs in compliance with the university's directives; however, she also identified some limitations of the LMS such as not incorporating online lectures and interactive tools.

With respect to principles for integrating online and face-to-face activities, the participants agreed on the value of both delivery modes. The extracts below report what PLs discussed regarding the equal importance of online and face-to-face elements.

> It's hard to say what is more important, online or face-to-face element. Theoretically, I may think that the online part accounts for 60% of students' achievement but the in-class component shouldn't be underestimated. The class time is when students express themselves most, and teachers support students by giving students instructions on presentations skills, pair work and teamwork. (Minh, programme leader 2)

> For me, both online and face-to-face parts are equally important because the online components provide students with language input and flexible study while the face-to-face components enable students' use of language input in speaking activities. (Mai, programme leader 3)

Furthermore, all participants expressed that they just followed the institutional regulations for English curriculum frameworks and classroom schedules in allocating time proportion for the blended programmes. For example, one of them

stated, “I don’t have any ideas on the proportion of time to be allocated to each mode of delivery and reasons for that option. I only follow the institutional regulations on the allocation of time for blended courses”. (Mai, programme leader 3)

In summary, the above evidence seems to indicate that the top-down directives affected the PLs’ decisions on instructional design such as what and how to blend online and face-to-face elements. It seems that the three PLs were involved in instructional design activities without formal training or experience in face-to-face and blended or online learning theories and instructional principles.

4.2.4 Division of labour

Division of labour comprises of divisions that are both horizontal and vertical (Engeström, 2001). Horizontal divisions reflect the different roles individuals play in the activity system while vertical divisions concern perceptions of power. *Division of labour* of the PLs’ design activity system refers to two main subthemes: the changing role of students and teachers, and student-teacher power relations.

4.2.4.1 Changing role of students and teachers

Generally, the PLs perceived that students in a blended class should become more autonomous and active, which could be a key factor for their learning achievement. For example, one participant thought:

> Students must be more autonomous to study in a blended environment. That means if students self-study all content knowledge actively on the LMS at home, they can study better in face-to-face classes. (Hoa, programme leader 1).

Similarly, commenting on the role of students in the blended courses, Mai said, “students’ active learning role is important in a blended learning environment when students mainly study online by themselves”. Mai appears to emphasize the importance of students’ active role especially when they shift to study online.

Moreover, according to the PLs, as blended learning tools were adopted at the university, the role of a teacher changed significantly. That is, teachers were no

longer the main source of knowledge but had become facilitators of students' learning. For example, Mai said:

> In blended classes, teachers are not knowledge transmitters anymore. Students can learn from different online learning materials or from peers. (Mai, programme leader 3).

Mai also added that when students self-study all English knowledge via the online mode of delivery, teachers' online teaching presence appears to be their monitoring of students' online learning, and communicating institutional requirements, saying:

> Teachers' role in blended classes is shown in the way teachers monitor students' online learning. For example, teachers set deadlines for students to complete online tasks and export online reports to check their completion. It's also the teacher's responsibility to talk to students about all course requirements of online and face-to-face participation.

Furthermore, Mai emphasized that teachers facilitated face-to-face learning by organizing collaborative activities and provide feedback to students. She commented:

> In class teaching procedures, teachers have to facilitate students' group works and pair works, then call some pairs to perform the conversations in front of the whole class and give them corrective feedback (Mai, programme leader 3).

Hoa's and Mai's comments suggest that the blended environment requires both teachers and students to change their roles and have new responsibilities.

Overall, the PLs' views of changing roles of students and teachers imply that blended learning might provide opportunities for enhancing students' learning autonomy since students will be exposed to a range of language input delivered online in EBCs.

4.2.4.2 Student-teacher power relations

The examples presented in this sub-theme suggest that the degree of power distance in the higher education context appears to influence the interaction between students and teachers in the class.

First, Minh began:

> I think students in a higher education context might feel a bit shocked because of changes in teacher-student relationship in that environment. For example, high school teachers often take care of students and have a friendly attitude and good relationship with their students while university teachers seem to have little communication and interaction with students. Only teachers often initiate communication with students while students rarely initiate communication with teachers. They [university teachers] often apply whole class teaching and speak with a commanding tone to students. (Minh, programme leader 3)

Minh's comment mentions some aspects of large power distances such as strong teacher-led teaching style and students' reliance on teachers' instructions, which appear to be caused by the influence of social hierarchical system - the gap between the university and high-school social relationship.

After that, Minh highlighted her concern about the negative influence that the existing large power distances may have on the nature of student-teacher interaction in the blended learning environment. She noted:

> The teacher-student power relationship at the tertiary level might lead to lack of classroom communication and interaction especially when students mainly study online. The lack of teacher-student interaction in the blended class will affect students' learning outcomes. Therefore, if students couldn't meet their learning goals, this won't be only because of students' low level of independent learning but teachers' lack of facilitating students' self-regulated learning through classroom interaction. However, how to develop students' self-regulation is difficult. (Minh, programme leader 2).

Minh's opinion implies that the nature of student-teacher interaction in the blended class, to some extent, can be affected by the level of the power relationship in her institution. Moreover, her last two sentences in the quote alluded to the imbalanced distribution of responsibility among students and teachers in the EBCs. There appears to have been no focused effort to develop learner autonomy online.

Overall, data in this regard suggest that the division of labour relationship between student and teacher in EBCs appears to be vertical. Although blended learning requires students to be more self-reliant, teachers still exert control of students' learning via monitoring and setting deadlines. It appears that the vertical division

of labour in EBCs can affect the nature of interaction in English language classrooms.

4.2.5 Outcomes

The *Outcome* describes the PLs' perceived results of the adoption of blended learning approach in teaching English to students. Using blended learning in English teaching was intended to result in an increase in the success rate of students in English courses (defined as passing grade or achieving course learning objectives by the PL participants).

Two participants indicated that although the benefits and intent of adopting blended learning at their institutions are undeniable, the effectiveness of blended courses is still limited. The PLs evaluated and estimated the effectiveness of blended classes as follows:

> I think students in blended courses were provided with more chances to practice using English in real life situations, which somehow satisfied students' learning needs. However, approximately just 45% of students in a class could achieve the defined course learning objectives. (Hoa, programme leader 1)

> The purpose of the blended learning programme is good, but the outcome of the program wasn't as good as what we expected from the beginning. I think, about 50% of students can meet the stated course objectives. (Minh, programme leader 2).

The above quotes illustrate that two PLs appear to be dissatisfied with the effectiveness of blended learning in helping students to achieve stated learning goals.

Commenting on the implementation of blended learning, Mai did not mention directly her perception about the outcome of the current blended programmes. Instead, she compared the current blended courses with traditional face-to-face courses. She said:

> I found that the blended classroom is better than the traditional classroom. In the English traditional classes, teachers in the institution normally followed instructions in textbooks and teachers' books. Thus, they [teachers] sometimes did not understand much about the course objectives. When teaching English in blended classes, teachers had to participate in

> developing blended learning curriculum, so they understood learning objectives better. As a result, they knew what knowledge and skills need to be taught to students. In general, the blended program required teachers to carefully prepare for their effective teaching. (Mai, programme leader 3).

Mai's comment suggests that one of the positive outcomes of the adoption of blended learning courses was the fact that teachers had to understand course objectives as a result of designing those courses. Moreover, Mai appears to imply that teachers might have changed their pedagogies when teachers need to prepare their teaching carefully.

The PLs commented on several reasons why they thought the outcomes of the blended programmes were not as intended. The examples of the PLs' comments are:

> Some factors contributing to the ineffectiveness of the blended learning implementation include technical issues, students' ability and teachers' competence. Firstly, the LMS now still has technical problems such as low speed or disconnection, and so it needs to be fixed. Secondly, if students' English ability was better, it would be easier for them to study in a blended environment. Thirdly, teachers' knowledge, methods and experience are very important. If teachers lacked knowledge of pedagogy in blended learning, they wouldn't help students learn better in a blended environment especially when students' learning abilities in a class are diverse. (Minh, program leader 2)

> I think about several factors in relation to teachers and students. For example, students and teachers' attitudes towards blended approach may affect the blended learning implementation. Students' motivation and self-regulation are both contributing and hindering factors that affect the success of blended learning. (Mai, programme leader 3)

The interview comments suggest to me that there were a number of challenges to blended courses relating to technology, teachers and students. For example, issues of technology infrastructure such as internet connectivity constrained using the LMS. Student-related challenges were identified including their level of English proficiency, their attitudes towards blended learning and their level of self-regulation. Besides, teachers' knowledge, teaching methods and experience may enable or hinder the successful implementation of blended courses.

In general, from the PLs' perspectives, the outcome of the adoption of EBCs in helping students to achieve their learning goals were still unsatisfactory. The

majority of students appeared not to achieve the intended learning goals of the blended courses. However, the PLs seemed to indicate some positive changes in teachers' pedagogy as a result of the adoption of EBCs. The PLs also identified several factors in relation to technology, teacher and student which may inhibit the blended learning implementation including technical issues, students' learning attitudes and self-regulation; and teachers' knowledge and experience.

To sum up, this section outlined salient elements from qualitative findings related to the PLs' design activity at their institution. The findings were arranged under key elements of Activity Theory. The findings indicated the driver for PLs' development of EBCs was from their positive belief of blended learning as an innovative teaching and learning method albeit shaped by institutional directives. My analysis of this data also revealed that when designing blended courses, the PLs' design activity was influenced by the top-down directives from the institution as well as regulated by the PLs' personal understandings of instructional design principles. The PLs also viewed digital technologies (LMS and social networking sites) as mediational tools that help deliver English knowledge. The PLs indicated a need for both teachers and students to adopt new roles and responsibilities in a blended learning environment. From the PLs' perspectives, the intended outcomes of the blended learning implementation in their institutions were not achieved. Challenges relating to technology, students and teachers in the EBCs possibly affected the successful implementation of those courses.

4.3 Teachers' perspectives of English blended courses

This section reports on the qualitative findings of interviews with five English teachers (four women and one man) regarding the teaching in EBCs at their institution. All of them are currently employed teaching full time at the university, and have taught at least two consecutive EBCs. At the time of data collection, the teachers' years of English teaching ranged from 7 to 10 years. All participants achieved their Master of Arts degrees in TESOL in Vietnam. The following figure illustrates the Activity Theory framework applied to the teaching activity in EBCs.

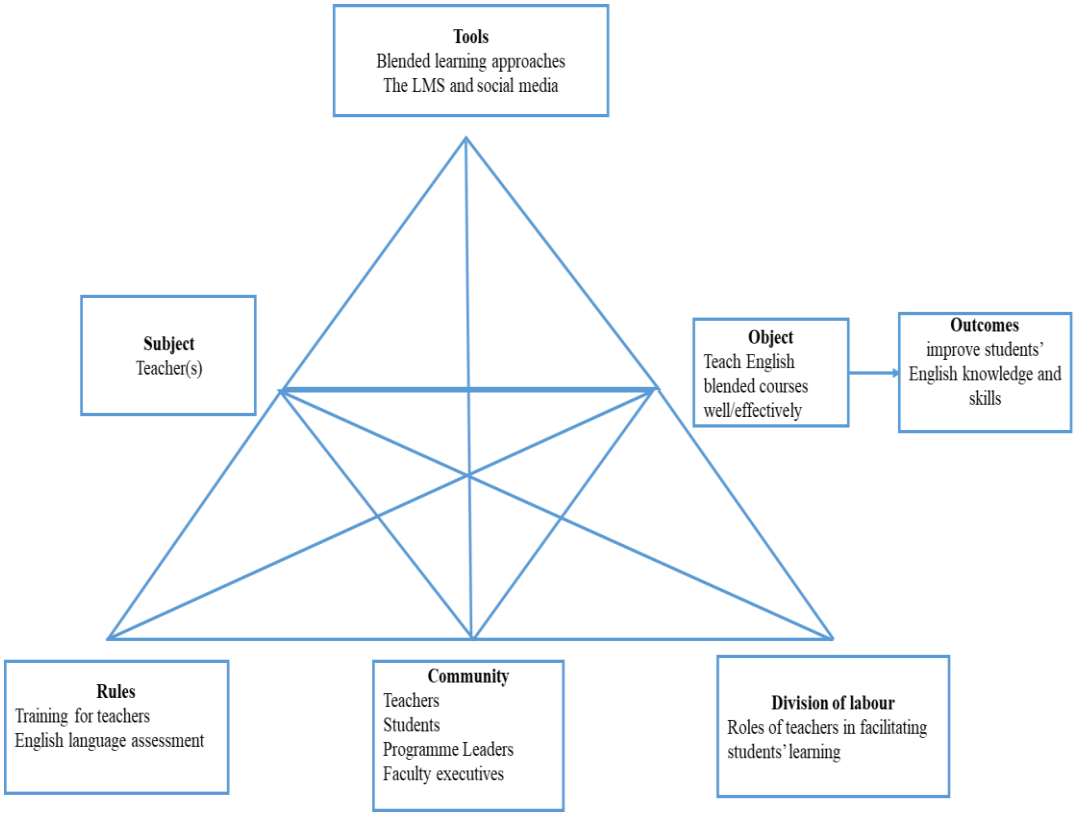


Figure 4.2. Teachers' teaching activity system

This section discusses five main themes corresponding to the five components of the teachers' teaching activity system as follows: *Tools, Rules, Object, Division of labour* and *Outcomes.*

4.3.1 Tools

The *Tools* element represents a means to an end or the way of helping the subject(s) achieve the activity's purpose. In the teachers' activity system, *Tools* refer to how the participant teachers understood blended learning approaches and used blended learning tools (the LMS and social media) to teach English blended courses (EBCs) well/effectively. Thus, the data discussed here included three main sub-themes:

- Teachers' understanding of blended learning approaches
- Teachers' use of the LMS to teach in EBCs
- Teachers' use of social media to facilitate students' learning in EBCs.

4.3.1.1 Understanding blended learning approaches

a) Understanding blended learning concepts

Five teacher participants described diverse perceptions of blended learning approaches. Two of them referred to blended learning as an integration of students' online learning and face-to-face learning. A common view among the participants is expressed in the following excerpt:

> Blended learning means a combination of self-study at home and face-to-face classes with teachers, learning through different channels. Students will study vocabularies, grammars, and reading, writing and listening skills online before practicing speaking skills in face-to-face lessons. (Tam, teacher interview 4)

Another teacher related blended learning to the mixture of students' different learning modes and a teacher's use of technology to enhance students' learning at home, saying:

> Blended learning means that students learn in many ways rather than learning in a specific way. Students can self-study. Teachers not only teach traditional classes but also apply information technology and internet to guide students to self-study using designed educational software. Students combine many different learning methods such as self-studying online at home, learning on the computer and learning in the classroom (Phuc, teacher interview 5)

Phuc appeared to explain changes in learning opportunities such as learning spaces (virtual vs. physical classes) as a result of blended learning approaches rather than changes in terms of teaching methods in blended learning environments.

Notably, among five teachers, only Huong emphasized pedagogical changes regarding blended classes compared to traditional classes. Traditional classes in Vietnam have been associated with a 'chalk and talk' approach to teaching, where teachers transmit knowledge, direct learning, and control classroom activities. Students' learning styles involve passively listening to lectures, taking notes and memorizing knowledge. Huong stated:

> Blended learning is a learning approach that allows students to study online at home and study face-to-face in class. And students will have to change their traditional learning methods that they were used to when studying at high school. Students in blended courses will self-study knowledge of

> grammar, vocabulary and listening, reading and writing skills at home. University teachers' role is now facilitating students' learning but not transmitting English grammar and vocabulary knowledge as in the past. (Huong, teacher interview 1).

Huong's comment implies that Vietnamese students in traditional English classes depended much on teachers' instruction and being taught the knowledge about a subject in class. She also appears to consider blended learning as a pedagogical change since teachers facilitate students' learning instead of transmitting knowledge. This learning mode may also provide students with opportunities to take control of their learning in that they have to self-study subject matters online before coming to face-to-face classes.

In summary, these above examples demonstrate that most of the teacher participants tended to define blended learning as the integration of online and face-to-face learning modes or the use of computer and Internet-based technologies rather than as radical changes in pedagogy. Thus, the teachers' divergent knowledge and interpretation of blended learning approaches suggests a need to help teachers gain a comprehensive understanding of blended learning as a pedagogy as well as how to alter their teaching methods and their roles in blended learning environments.

b) Understanding instructional design for blended learning

Firstly, the teachers expressed their different views regarding the blending of online and face-to-face components. Two of them thought that online learning is an add-on part to face-to-face lessons. For example, Tam stated, "Face-to-face class is the lead in the blending model and online activities only support face-to-face learning and prepare students for in-class speaking activities." (Tam, teacher interview 4).

Tam's comment suggests that she seemed to focus mainly on face-to-face class teaching and considered the online components as a means for face-to-face class preparation and practice rather than a means to enhance more efficient and productive use of teaching time in face-to-face classes.

Other two teachers considered that the online component of blended courses at the university is more important than the face-to-face component because online learning provides students with all content knowledge of the course and students just need to be disciplined and self-regulated in their study at home. An example of this opinion is:

> I don't really understand about principles for designing blended learning courses. However, I think the lead in the blended model at the university is the online part since students have to study by themselves at home before face-to-face class. In my opinion, students' learning autonomy at home decides from 70% to 80% of their academic success while face-to-face lessons with teachers only account for 20% of a student's academic success. (Giang, teacher interview 2).

Giang viewed students' learning autonomy as a key factor for students' academic achievement. Her quote also suggests that the online part of EBCs seemed to help enhance students' learning autonomy since students had to self-study all English knowledge as a result of the course requirement.

Only one teacher perceived that online and face-to-face elements need to be integrated purposefully to help students achieve their learning goals, saying:

> Blended learning requires students to make the best utilization of all different learning methods to achieve the highest learning outcomes, so it is impossible to say either the online or the face-to-face part is more important than the other. Both modes of learning [online and face-to-face modes] support each other. If students do not study online at home before face-to-face classes, the study in the classroom will be very difficult because teachers have to use face-to-face time to present knowledge delivered online again instead of implementing speaking activities. As a consequence, students will have very limited time to communicate in English in class time and won't be able to achieve the objectives of the lesson. (Phuc, teacher interview 5)

Phuc's perception of blended learning design seems to be based on the considerations of what learning objectives can be best achieved by the thoughtful integration of both learning modes and students' level of autonomous learning.

The teachers also revealed their opinions on how their blended courses were designed and implemented. Regarding online activities, teachers realized some drawbacks; for example, aims for activities were not always clearly communicated to students. An example of this is:

> I found that teachers didn't set goals of online activities clearly, and students don't know what goals of online activities are. Teachers only uploaded learning materials to the LMS. Most students do not know what the objectives of online activities are. (Giang, teacher interview 2).

According to Huong, to reduce students' confusion and misunderstanding of requirements for online activities, instructions for online learning activities were written in both English and Vietnamese from the beginning. However, Huong's students were still confused about how to complete online activities. She said:

> Students sometimes asked me how to complete phonetic tasks. Particularly, students with very low-level of English always took screenshots of online phonetic activities and asked me to guide how to complete those activities, then I would have to explain again and again for them [low-level English students]. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

With respect to face-to-face learning materials, all teachers acknowledged that learning objectives of each lesson were highlighted in the textbook. Four teachers mentioned that they knew about these objectives, but they did not inform those objectives to students explicitly and regularly. Examples are in the following excerpts:

> Actually, I told students that learning objectives are stated in the textbook once at the beginning of the course, but I felt students ignored it and felt reluctant to read it. It seems that students didn't understand, and they didn't care much about those things [learning objectives]. (Van, teacher interview 3)

> All learning objectives of the course were clear and written in the course outline. I understand it [the course outline] and use it to adjust my teaching only. I was sometimes not explicit about learning objectives and expected learning outcomes. (Phuc, teacher interview 5)

The above comments suggest to me that some teachers may not be clear about the purpose and value of stating learning objectives, and about how making students aware of learning objectives might develop students' ability to take control of their own learning. Hence, the teachers did not require students to pay attention to those learning objectives.

Only one teacher appeared to regularly communicate lesson goals to students and checked their understandings and achievement of stated goals, saying:

> I think lesson goals were stated clearly in face-to-face learning materials. The Dean often asked teachers to read the objectives of each lesson in the course outline very carefully to know how to teach students. For me, before each face-to-face lesson, I always ask students to tell me the goals of the lesson today. At the end of each lesson, I ask students to self-reflect whether they can achieve the learning goals. If students may feel that they haven't achieved the learning goals, I advise them to revise knowledge at home. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

Giang's response suggests that she used some strategies to help develop students' self-regulated learning skills such as individual goal settings and self-assessment.

The participant teachers also talked about the appropriateness and integration of online activities and face-to-face activities. Generally, most teachers felt that online and face-to-face enhanced each other. Some of their reasons are presented below:

> Teachers always design online activities so that they are suitable for speaking activities in class, and students will learn online before going to face-to-face classes. Speaking activities are somehow similar to writing activities on the LMS. That's why the online part and the face-to-face part enhance each other. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

> The online exercises are related to the lesson topic in class. For example, English knowledge such as vocabulary, listening, reading or writing delivered on the LMS are linked to the topic of speaking in the classroom. Studying in face-to-face class is mainly a revision and consolidation of the knowledge students have learned online at home. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

Referring to the appropriateness of learning activities to proficiency levels of students, some teachers suggested redesigning some of the online activities because those activities seem to be too overwhelming and difficult for students who have just begun their learning through blended contexts. Teachers explained:

> From the beginning, students felt overwhelmed and struggled with lots of knowledge and exercise online and reported that online activities were difficult for them to complete. (Phuc, teacher interview 5)

> I observed that my first-year students complained much about the overload of online activities and about 30% of students in my classes really struggled doing online exercises because their English competence is very low. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

As noted in Phuc's and Huong's comments, the online tasks appear to be difficult due to students' low English proficiency level and studying online is a new experience for them.

Overall, from these above examples, it appears that the teachers' approaches to, and practices of, blended learning link closely with their personal beliefs and teaching experiences. There also appear to be gaps in terms of professional development and ongoing support for tertiary teachers regarding blended pedagogies.

4.3.1.2 Use of the LMS

Firstly, all the teachers reported using the LMS to provide students with subject knowledge, drill and practice exercises of the subject knowledge and language skills. For example, Giang (teacher interview 2) said, "all subject knowledge such as English grammar, vocabularies, reading and listening was uploaded to the LMS, and there was a lot of exercises for students to practice online" (Giang, teacher interview 2).

Similarly, Phuc (teacher interview 5) mentioned using the LMS to make learning materials available and accessible at any time anywhere for students, saying, "it is convenient for students to study online because students could learn knowledge and practice exercises as many times as they want".

The two quotes suggest that the teachers principally used the LMS as a resource bank of information and as a tool for students to practice tasks.

Another stated function of the LMS was to monitor student compliance in completing tasks. The teachers mentioned their use of online reports in the LMS to monitor students' completion of online learning tasks. For example, Phuc stated:

> Online reports provide me evidence for checking students' completion of online activities before students attend face-to-face classes. And we [teachers] can remind students if they haven't finished required homework. (Phuc, teacher interview 5).

> I checked the online reports every week to know how many students logged in to do online exercises and how many of them finished online

> tasks. I also showed the online reports in every face-to-face lesson and continuously warned them [students] about their incomplete online tasks…If teachers don't export online reports regularly, some students may not study online until the end of the course. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

Phuc's and Giang's comments suggest that they appeared to use online reports to monitor students' online learning completion rather than monitoring students' online learning.

In summary, the teachers' use of LMS tools was to present language knowledge, provide drills and practice of language knowledge and monitor students' completion of online activities. It appears that the LMS was used according to traditional pedagogy, which relied on a systematic mode of transmission and put forward the teachers' authority role.

4.3.1.3 Use of social media: Facebook and Messenger

All the teachers reported that there was a lack of communication tools in the university LMS such as discussion forums so teachers could not interact with students within the LMS. As a result, they used social media as synchronous and asynchronous communication tools to facilitate students' learning throughout EBCs. For example, Giang explained how she used Facebook to enhance students' access to relevant learning materials and give feedback:

> I found social networking sites like Facebook or Messenger useful and have used it daily to support students' learning. I have heard about other tools like Blogs or Wikis, but I think Vietnamese students rarely use Blogs or Wikis. They [Vietnamese students] prefer to use Facebook as a social communication tool, so I chose to use Facebook… I created a Facebook group to share supplementary materials to students. I provide additional reading materials, additional practice drills and further phonetic guidance for students. I also help students with other skills they study online or answer their questions regarding online studying. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

Giang was not the only teacher using Facebook because Van also used Facebook and Messenger as online learning tools to provide more opportunities for students' collaborative learning, saying:

> I also regularly use social networking tools like Facebook and Messenger to support my English teaching. I created a class group on Facebook and asked students to upload their recorded video clips of their talk about a

> specific topic on Facebook. Therefore, other students in the class can give comments to students' uploaded video clips on Facebook. I mainly use Facebook as a tool to interact with students online because currently there is no tool to conduct online discussion within the LMS. The LMS only allows us to add and review learning materials, and export online reports. (Van, teacher interview 3)

Giang's and Van's quotes demonstrate that the current LMS system could not afford teacher-student interaction. As a result, teachers appeared to use social media as an alternative to encourage students to actively participate in learning activities. Pedagogically, the teachers used social media to provide more language input; to encourage students to contact teachers and peers; and to provide feedback to students.

In short, data in this regard suggest that the teachers interpreted blended learning and blended learning instructional design differently. Moreover, they used the LMS to present English knowledge, and provide students with drills for language skills. The affordances of the LMS tended to focus on accessibility such as making learning resources available in digital formats rather than on interactivity because the LMS did not incorporate interactive tools such as discussion boards or chat rooms. Despite teachers' attempt at using Facebook and Messenger as communication tools outside the LMS, it appears that teachers still need more knowledge, resources, support, input, and a clear understanding of educational purposes of such available tools as well as how best to use those tools to maximize students' learning.

The next heading, *Rules*, suggests, there were also a range of regulations and norms which mediate the relationship between teachers and their teaching practices in a blended environment.

4.3.2 Rules

The *Rules* element refers to different sets of regulations or structures that governed the teaching of EBCs in the institution. In the teachers' activity system, the *Rules* concern the training for teachers to teach in a blended environment, and the institution's English language assessment framework.

4.3.2.1 Training for teachers

This theme refers to the training teachers received prior to teaching in a blended format. Teachers described the types of training, the trainers and the training hours they received in their institution. For example, Huong stated:

> A team leader instructs teachers to prepare teaching profiles; how to export online reports; steps for teaching face-to-face classes; how to use the course outline; and how to conduct assessment throughout the course. Actually, training about teaching methods wasn't paid much attention, almost not mentioned. We only teach speaking skills in face-to-face lessons, and do not teach other linguistic skills…Because we [teachers] are in a course design team, we understand about teaching methods… that why the team leader only trained us how to prepare teaching profiles before going to class according to institutional regulations. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

Huong's experience about the training for teachers at the beginning of her EBCs suggests to me that the training largely focused on adhering to and communicating administrative regulations for teachers and neglected pedagogical aspects of blended learning. It seems that the institutional training did not focus on teaching methods as the teachers were thought to know about teaching methods in traditional English classes. However, the teachers may not know about blended learning pedagogies. Moreover, Huong's final comment appears to show the trainer's compliance with university's requirements about guiding teachers to prepare teaching profiles for blended classes.

According to Giang, the workshop for teachers covered a lot of content regarding teaching methods, LMS tools and technological skills. She said:

> At the beginning of the semester, there was a workshop and the head of the department or the team leader would provide training for teachers. Less experienced teachers would be trained very carefully on the methods of teaching in a blended mode. The training often lasted about two hours and mainly focused on: how to guide students to access the LMS; how to export online reports; skills in information technology; and how to deal with problems students faced when they study online. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

Giang's comment about careful training regarding teaching methods appeared to contradict Huong's comment because Huong emphasized that the training on pedagogy was very limited. Moreover, Giang's comment about the only two-hour

workshop and her statement of careful teaching method training for less experienced teachers seem to be contradictory to each other. It appears to be hard to provide teachers with a comprehensive understanding of a range of aspects covered in the workshop in two hours. Despite emphasizing the training about pedagogy, Giang did not describe any further information about that training. Instead, she spoke about technological aspects of the training content.

Taken together, it appears that the training may have only made the rules for administrative demands more explicit to teachers rather than making pedagogical principles for effective second language teaching in a blended environment clearer to teachers. It is likely that most of the teachers were generally not sufficiently trained to teach in a blended environment.

4.3.2.2 English language assessment framework

The teachers reported their views regarding the current English assessment framework at the university. Firstly, they provided an overview of the testing assessment framework in the EBCs, which consists of two main components, namely a continuous assessment and a final test, as summarized in Figure 4.3

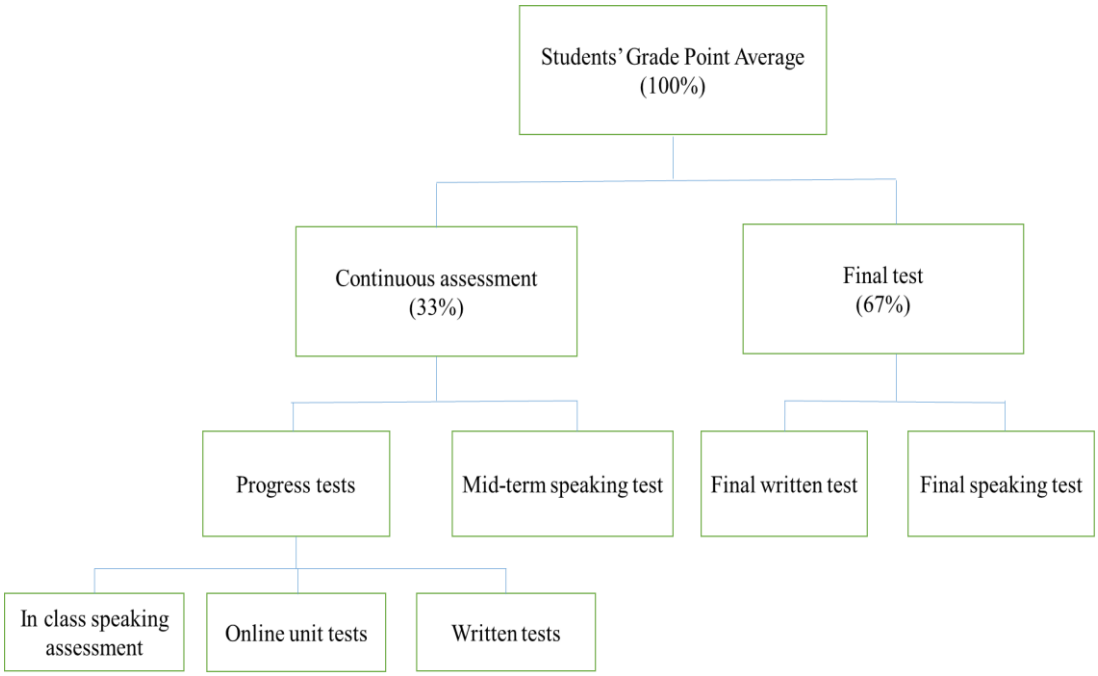


Figure 4.3. English language assessment framework at the university

The above diagram suggests that the current English assessment framework at the university focuses mostly on summative aspects of learning assessment, mainly because the results of the final test account for 67% of a student's overall grade for the subject.

The teachers also reported that the format of progress written tests comprises of five parts: listening, vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing, aiming at measuring students' achievement of grammar, vocabulary and language skills in relation to the syllabus. The online unit tests and the final written test have the same structure as written progress tests. Regarding the in-class speaking assessment, each student has to make at least two public performances per term, and these performances are marked. Students also have to take a mid-term speaking test and a final speaking test. These consist of three parts: introduction; peer conversation and topic talk.

Moreover, the teachers emphasized that students were generally required to attend at least 80% face-to-face teaching sessions and had to complete 100% of online learning components so as to be eligible to take the final test. Students of the same cohort were required to take the same progress and mid-term tests. The general guideline for testing and assessment was expressed in one subsection in the syllabus, acting as a reference for the teachers when needed.

Secondly, according to the participant teachers, all test types were generally effective because test items could measure students' subject knowledge. However, all the teachers worried that students' cheating would undermine the validity and reliability of online unit tests results. Some of responses are:

> The online tests didn't assess students' ability because students could ask friends to do online tests for them [students], so teachers couldn't control whether or not students completed online tests on their own. I think the speaking test was more reliable because it helped teachers to assess students' ability more accurately. (Huong, teacher interview 1).

> I think paper tests in class were reliable to assess students' learning performance because students had to take those tests in class time under teachers' surveillance, so students had no chances to copy other students' answers. Online tests were less reliable because it depended on students' integrity in doing tests and teachers couldn't control. Sometimes students

> asked other students to do online tests or copy answers from friends. (Phuc, teacher interview 5)

It appears that students could cheat in several ways when doing online tests, including the use of outside resources such as asking friends' help or the use of a test surrogate. Thus, the online test score might not reflect accurately students' abilities.

Most of the teachers (4/5) appeared to deem oral tests as the most effective test format compared to current written and online tests. Van noted:

> I think the speaking test is more effective than other paper tests because teachers-as assessors in that case can evaluate exact a student's communicative ability. I don't rely much on online unit tests because I know some students pay money to hire another student to complete online tests for them. (Van, teacher interview 3)

The above extracts suggest that cheating was the biggest concern associated with the validity and reliability of online tests. The fact that some students found ways to get higher scores in doing online tests appears to show issues related to the effectiveness of summative assessment in online learning.

In summary, the student assessment in EBCs relied on summative activities such as written tests and online tests, which resulted in a score or grade for high-stakes purposes. Some issues regarding student cheating in doing online tests raised a need to help teachers to select appropriate types of assessment for online learning to best assess students' learning outcomes.

Overall, data regarding the *Rules* element suggest that there was the lack of institutional guidelines, sufficient training and ongoing professional support for teachers about how to enhance learning and assessment through both online and face-to-face modes.

4.3.3 Object

The *Object* element is to answer the question 'why' of the activity system and is the 'ultimate reason' behind various behaviours of individuals, groups or organizations. Given that my focus is on the use of blended learning approach in

teaching English, I was interested in what teachers perceived as benefits of blended learning approach. Data suggest that all the participant teachers concurred that blended learning approach could bring a number of benefits for students, teachers and institutions.

4.3.3.1 Benefits for students

The participant teachers mentioned some benefits of blended learning approach related to students including: providing flexible study; providing a comfortable practice environment for the target language; and increasing students' engagement.

Firstly, three participants indicated that blended learning appears to help students to have flexible study because this approach could provide students with more freedom of deciding to study anywhere at any time. An example of this idea is:

> Students are now well equipped with several technological devices such as laptops or smartphones, so they can study online parts of blended courses whenever and wherever they want. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

Secondly, four participants believed that the reductions in classroom time and class size as a result of the blended learning approach seem to create a comfortable learning environment for students, enabling more opportunities to practice English language in face-to-face classes. For example:

> Because of reducing class seat time, students in blended courses only study 90 minutes each lesson instead of 180 minutes each lesson as in the past. Thus, students didn't feel tired or bored with studying English anymore. They seemed more relaxed to participate in speaking practice. (Van, interview teacher 3)

> Another advantage of blended learning is class size reduction from 45-50 classes to 22-25 classes, leading to more talking time in English for each student in class. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

Thirdly, two teachers believed students' engagement in blended classes would be promoted when students actively participated in pair work and group work activities in face-to-face classes. Some illustrative responses are:

> Teachers in blended courses organize games to encourage students to participate in class activities, and let students practice speaking, share ideas and understandings in pair works or group works. I think this will make

> students to get more involved in class activities as well as interact more with teachers and other classmates. (Tam, teacher interview 4)
>
> Basically, I feel that blended classes are more engaging than traditional classes because students are only studying speaking skills in the class and study other language skills online. (Van, teacher interview 3).

Teachers' views regarding blended learning benefits for students seem to be born out from their own expectation about the success of the adoption of blended learning.

4.3.3.2 Benefits for teachers

According to the teachers, there are two main benefits for them when teaching blended courses including: reducing teaching efforts in delivering content knowledge; and enhancing teachers' monitoring of student learning.

Firstly, all five teacher participants stated that in EBCs, they could save their teaching efforts in presenting the subject matters (grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening skills) since all of this knowledge was delivered online via the LMS. As a result, they all felt motivated teaching only speaking skills in face-to-face meetings. For example, they said:

> I think teachers feel more relaxed teaching in a blended mode than in a traditional mode in which they [teachers] normally had to teach all grammar and vocabulary knowledge to students in face-to-face classes. I also feel that the classroom environment is more exciting in blended classes because students only study speaking skills and participate in speaking activities. (Huong, teacher interview 1)
>
> I feel that teachers seem to love their teaching more when they teach in a blended environment. Teachers feel more excited because they only teach speaking activities in class. They are more enthusiastic while teaching face-to-face activities. Teachers also see students' interests when learning English, and teachers do not have to spend time and effort in teaching many things that teachers may find boring like reading skills or grammar in face-to-face classes. They will feel happier when only teaching speaking skills in class. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

It seems that the teachers preferred this blended learning mode because it helped the teachers to save teaching effort as a result of letting students to study all lexical and grammatical content knowledge via the LMS by themselves.

Secondly, one participant (Huong, teacher interview 1) emphasized that blended learning could enhance her "monitoring of students' learning at home" because Huong often "used the online reports to check students' online tasks completion percentage and reminded students to complete online language practice before they attend the face-to-face lessons". She further added that the online reports helped her to manage students' online learning.

In short, the teachers' perspectives on the benefits of blended learning for them seem to mainly focus on external factors such as saving teaching effort and managing students. None of the teachers clearly mentioned blended learning benefits regarding pedagogic aspects such as student-centred learning approaches or facilitating learning. This implies that teachers, to some extent, may still perceive their role as knowledge deliverers rather than facilitators of students' learning in blended classes.

4.3.3.3 Benefits for the institution

Four teachers verbalised that the implementation of blended learning, and the ability to focus on speaking skills in the classroom, offer opportunities for producing graduates with strong speaking skills, which in turn enhances institutional reputation and graduate employability. For example:

> Blended learning helps students use English for communicative purposes, and it is beneficial for the university's reputation if graduate students find a good job and use English for their profession. (Giang teacher interview 2)

> I think a goal that every institution desires is that students will have good jobs after graduation. Because the level of English communicative ability of many students in my institution is very limited, applying this method [blended learning] successfully will help students communicate and speak English confidently. Thus, job opportunities will be quite open to graduate students when their English and profession skills are good. The increasing number of successful students will bring the university a good reputation as well. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

Briefly, the participant teachers believed that the adoption of blended learning approach in their institution has the potential for improving the quality of English

language oral communication in their institution, which they hope will result in graduate employability and the reputation of the institution.

4.3.4 Division of labour

The *Division of Labour* element defines the role of teachers in EBCs. Data from interviews reveals that teachers used some strategies to facilitate students' learning in both online and face-to-face environments.

4.3.4.1 Teachers' facilitation in the online learning environment

The participant teachers appeared to facilitate students' learning by creating a supportive learning environment. The main strategy all the teachers used is to encourage students to contact them and classmates using cell phones or social media because the university LMS itself did not allow teachers to interact with students. For example, Van stated:

> At the beginning of the course, I gave students my mobile phone number and Messenger account. I encouraged them to contact me whenever they have difficulties in studying online. And students mainly used Facebook to connect with me and peers. I always respond to students as soon as possible. (Van, teacher interview 3)

Van's comment suggests that she tried to create a safe environment for students to interact with her and other classmates so that students could feel comfortable when studying online.

In a similar vein, Phuc reported that other teachers in EBCs tried to build an online community outside the LMS to facilitate students' online learning, saying:

> Teachers used online communication tools to communicate with students such as social networking sites. Through social networking sites, students could share their learning difficulties. Teachers might understand students' feelings and learning troubles as well as their learning preference through students' comments on the Facebook group. After that teachers would work with students to find solutions to help them learn more effectively. (Phuc, teacher interview 5)

It appears that both Phuc and Van understood the importance of teaching presence in an online learning environment and tried to create an online community outside the LMS to interact with students. However, teachers' use of social media was not

specifically guided and facilitated. That means it was hard to know: what really happened on Facebook and Messenger; and whether teachers' use of social media was aligned to pedagogical principles for EFL blended learning.

4.3.4.2 Teachers' facilitation in the face-to-face environment

a) Creating a supporting learning environment

Three of the five teachers reported that they discussed the norms regarding acceptable behaviours in both face-to-face and online environments such as openness and respect. Giang said:

> Because shy students or low-level students were so reluctant to engage in classroom activities, I asked better students in class to help them. I explained clearly to the whole class that low-level students or shy students were not confident in speaking English; therefore, better students should respect and help them to feel more comfortable talking in the class. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

In the interviews, two teachers also reported their attempts at encouraging students to talk about their learning experiences and concerns regarding blended learning during the face-to-face classes. Huong responded:

> I often spent from five to ten minutes at the beginning of each face-to-face lesson asking students to share their learning experiences with me and other students. I always asked if they have difficulties in learning online or completing online unit tests or having any questions or concerns about online parts. However, there were some students who were so reticent that they [some reticent students] never shared anything, always kept silent and did not participate in speaking classes. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

In short, the teacher participants appear to try to create a supportive learning environment by setting some classroom norms and building teacher-student and student-student relationships. However, none of the teachers mentioned explicitly how to express respect and openness or how to build relationship between a teacher and students. Moreover, Huong's last comment about silent students implies that factors might exist which prevent students feeling safe, valued and empowered in the English face-to-face class.

b) Encouraging collaborative learning

Interview data suggests that participant teachers used two techniques to facilitate collaborative learning in face-to-face classes. The first technique was to organize students to work in pairs or groups to complete a learning task or create a specific product. For example, Giang reported:

> I regularly implemented face-to-face class activities in pairs or groups to help students have more chances to practice speaking English. I also assigned students to work in groups outside class. For example, I got students to collaborate to make a video speaking about one specific topic and posted it [video] on Facebook. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

The second technique was to monitor students' collaborative working to give timely assistance using different strategies. For example, one of them used the strategy such as grouping students according to ability, saying:

> When organizing students to work in pairs or groups, I often arrange high and low able students to work in the same pairs or groups so that less able students can learn from more able students. (Tam, teacher interview 4)

Another teacher, Van, used another strategy to monitor collaborative learning such as keeping a moderate size group of 4 or 5, stating:

> I think a group of 4 or 5 students is ideal to make sure that all members will contribute to group tasks, so I often keep groups of 4 and I can easily monitor and assess the ways individuals participated in group work". (Van, teacher interview 3)

Only one teacher, Giang, reported introducing some group working skills to students such as respecting others and maintaining focus:

> I often require students to work in pairs and then perform their work in front of the class. Pair members have to listen to others, respect and accept different viewpoints and not offend others. (Giang, teacher interview 2).

It appears that teachers' facilitation of face-to-face students' collaborative learning mainly focuses on arranging pair work and groupwork activities rather than on guiding students' skills for effective collaboration such as questioning, expressing their own meaning, and comprehending others' ideas via oral interaction with peers.

c) Providing students with feedback on their learning

According to the teachers, feedback was given mainly in speaking face-to-face classes. All teachers concurred that their purpose in giving feedback is "to help students to identify what area is right, what is wrong and help them feel more confident and understand lessons better". (Giang, teacher interview 2)

One teacher mentioned regularly providing students with positive and error corrective feedback, saying "I always started by giving praises for good points and encouraged students. After that, I pointed out errors and give correction. However, I realized that students still make the same errors over and over again." (Van, teacher interview 3)

It seems that all the participant teachers perceived giving feedback as pointing out right or wrong answers and informing students about correctness. However, Van's comment suggests that her corrective feedback seemed not to result in students' uptake because students repeated the same errors. There may be, then, a need to give teachers formal training about: what types of corrective feedback; how to best give corrective feedback as well as the importance of corrective feedback as a scaffolding teaching strategy.

All teachers reported instructing students formally in knowing criteria for peer feedback. An example of this instruction is:

> I asked my students to assess their peers regularly. I often stated evaluation criteria for speaking activities. I also emphasized that the feedback process here is not to criticize students but to help them to earn higher score in future. But sometimes I have to force students to participate in the feedback process by giving them a provisional grade. For example, a student might be invited to give feedback to peers and earn a higher grade, but when a student might not focus on peers' work and give no feedback, he/she would get a low grade. In fact, when being asked to give feedback to peers, a lot of students in my class said they didn't hear anything because their friends spoke too soft. I thought this is only their excuse for their lack of concentration on peers' talks. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

The above comment suggests to me that a number of students neglected getting actively involved in giving peer assessment in face-to-face classes. The reasons for students' neglect in peer-feedback might be that students did not understand

speaking assessment criteria; or students had no experience in how to give feedback; or students were afraid of receiving a lower grade if they would not give good feedback.

Interestingly, only one teacher perceived that it was helpful to have students provide feedback on an example of work in relation to the stated criteria and model how to give feedback in class. The illustrative response is:

> For example, after each unit, students will have to submit an essay about the unit topic. I chose a sample of students' writings and give feedback on it. Firstly, I showed the assessment criteria such as expectations on grammar, vocabulary, structure and content. Secondly, I marked the sample and gave feedback along with the whole class discussion. After that, I get students to give peer feedback" (Phuc, teacher interview 5).

It seems that this kind of the teacher's practice might enable students to interpret and apply assessment criteria more accurately rather than only knowing about them.

Overall, data in this regard suggest that teachers made an attempt at providing positive and corrective feedback with reference to the stated assessment criteria. However, none of them mentioned giving 'Feed Forward' to students; for example, what follow-up activities should be taken to make students to have better progress. The participant teachers' current model of feedback appears to focus on the task level rather on the process of the task or self-regulation skills.

d) Developing students' ability to take control of own learning

Evidence from teacher interviews showed that although teachers acknowledged the necessity of encouraging autonomous learning in the blended environment, they did not appear to model strategies that would enable students to become independent learners.

Data suggest that the strategy some teachers (2/5) used to raise students' awareness of the importance of autonomous learning in a blended environment at the university was the 'carrot and stick' approach to motivation, which made use of rewards and punishments to induce desired behaviour. For example, Giang stated:

> It was really hard for me to develop students' ability to take control of their own learning. At the beginning of the course, I only use "threats" strategy. I told them [students] that now in a university learning environment especially in this university, the mode of English learning is different from that in a high school learning environment. Senior students at the university had to self-study. Their learning autonomy accounted for 80% of their learning success but not teachers' knowledge transmission. Thus, all of you [students] have to work hard and study at home much by yourselves in order to pass the final exam. (Giang, teacher interview 2).

As can be noted in this example, Giang used a 'stick'-examination failure-as a powerful motivator to help students take control of their learning goals throughout the course. However, at the same time, she also used a 'carrot' approach to motivating students by showing the potential to become a competent English user. She acknowledged, "I know you may struggle studying English online for the first time, but when you feel confident speaking English, you'll feel more relaxed studying English" (Giang, teacher interview 2). It appears that Giang's motivational approach specifically focused on behaviouristic strategies. Also, her 'threats' approach might have negative influence on students such as feeling terrified of failure or punishment.

Another strategy that four teachers employed to help students promote their self-regulated learning is communicating all information such as courses objectives, learning expectations, methods of assessment and examination at the beginning of blended courses. For example, two teachers stated:

> As required by the faculty, I introduce for students all the information such as courses objectives, expectations, examination eligibility at the beginning of the course as well as assessment criteria for speaking and writing. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

> It's compulsory for teachers to inform students about course objectives, regulations and methods of assessment. However, students may listen but not really remember and understand all. I sent students all documents about those things via emails and hope that students can read more at home and understand the purpose of the course. (Phuc, teacher interview 5)

It seems that the teachers introduced all the information of courses as requested by the faculty administration but did not check whether students understand these, or set up their learning goals using the course objectives. It also appears that

students may be overwhelmed with information at the start, and do not realise the importance of this information.

All the teachers perceived that students' self-evaluation was important for students' learning process because "its [self-evaluation] purpose is to help students to know their learning progress compared to their learning goals. Then students could know what knowledge they still did not master and what needed to be improved". (Huong, teacher interview 1)

However, none of the teachers reported engaging students in regular evaluation of their progress in the target language. For example, Van emphasized:

> I haven't asked students to carry out self-assessment yet, and the faculty leaders have never mentioned about it yet. I sometimes told students "If you failed to complete your stated learning goals for studying vocabulary such as remembering meanings, spellings and pronunciation, you would have to study and practice that vocabulary again". (Van teacher interview 3)

In short, all the participant teachers perceived that it was important to develop students' ability to take control of their own learning both in an online environment and inside the classroom. However, there were some gaps between teachers' perceptions and what they actually did to guide students to become independent learners. The existing gaps might be due to teachers' lack of professional training regarding blended learning pedagogies.

4.3.5 Outcomes

The *Outcomes* element refers to the results of the adoption of a blended learning approach, and there were intended outcomes as well as unintended outcomes. Teachers' perspectives revealed that intended outcomes of the adoption of blended courses seemed to be the improvement in students' speaking skills and vocabulary knowledge as well as the development of students' confidence. Teachers' interview data also show that there were unintended outcomes such as students' lower grades in listening and reading skills.

4.3.5.1 Intended outcomes

Four participant teachers perceived that among all language skills, speaking skills seemed to be improved the most. They tended to link students' improvement in speaking skills to the opportunity to develop and practise their vocabulary and target language. For example:

> Students' vocabularies were improved greatly in blended courses because students could learn and revise vocabularies in the LMS as many times as they wanted. In the class, students have more opportunities to use those vocabularies and practice English speaking. As a result, students' speaking skills would be improved as well, and they [students] could communicate using English. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

> I feel my students' speaking skills were enhanced most since students have more chances to practice the target language in their blended courses. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

Moreover, three teachers emphasized that there was the increase in students' degree of English speaking confidence as a result of students' positive attitudes towards English blended learning. Phuc noted:

> I see that students changed their learning attitudes throughout blended courses, they seemed to love English more, be more engaged in speaking activities, and feel more comfortable and confident in speaking English both inside classroom and outside classroom. (Phuc, teacher interview 5)

Another teacher, Giang, also felt impressed by students' English speaking confidence after observing her students' English speaking performance in a real-life situation, saying:

> If students study hard, I'm sure that they can use English in daily communication, and they will feel confident in communication. For example, my students at the faculty C could talk confidently with foreigners when they had a field trip to Ha Long [a city in Vietnam]. (Giang, teacher interview 2)

In short, most of the teachers (4/5) agreed that students' speaking skills and vocabulary were more improved than other language skills. This can be associated with some benefits of blended learning such as comfortable learning environment for English practice and students' engagement in face-to-face speaking activities.

4.3.5.2 Unintended outcomes

The teachers reported on some unexpected outcomes as the results of the adoption of blended learning in teaching English such as students' lower grades in listening and reading skills. Van said:

> In general, students' speaking skills were most improved compared to other skills. However, students' listening skills and reading skills were still very limited. (Van, teacher interview 3)

Similarly, Huong shared the same idea with Van when talking about students' listening test performance in blended courses, saying:

> Students' speaking and vocabularies could be improved greatly, but students' level of other skills such as listening skills were still low because students' listening test results were very poor. (Huong, teacher interview 1)

Giang (teacher interview 2) identified some reasons why her students' listening and reading scores were improved very little in the course, stating, "…because the design of online reading and listening activities may not be clear. Teachers only uploaded audio files to the LMS, and online listening activities would be: listening to the audio to answer questions or fill in blanks. Students sometimes turned on the audio for listening but didn't really understand what they [students] were listening".

After that, Giang further suggested some changes regarding designing listening activities. She said:

> In my opinion, listening activities should be designed into three parts: pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. And students should know about new words in the listening part before they listen to it. However, all current online listening activities did not present new words to students. That's why students' listening skills couldn't be improved much. (Giang, teacher interview 2).

Giang's above comments reveal her own experience about current listening activity design and approach to teaching listening skills. She also appears to show a flaw in the design of online listening activities in EBCs, and offers suggestions for improvement.

In summary, this section presented the findings of teachers' perspectives of EBCs. The findings were also arranged under five main themes corresponding to five key elements of Activity Theory-*Tools, Rules, Division of labour, Object* and *Outcomes*. In the teachers' activity system, *Tools* referred to blended learning approaches in which teachers used some of the blended learning tools such as the LMS and social media as physical mediators for their English teaching. There were also a set of institutional rules, which influenced teachers' roles and practices in EBCs. The *Object* of the teachers' activity system, defined as underlying reasons for the adoption of blended learning approach, was closely associated with both expected and unexpected outcomes of the activity system.

4.4 Chapter summary

This chapter presents important findings related to staff (programme leader and teacher) perspectives of EBCs in a Vietnamese higher education context through the lens of Activity Theory.

In Section 4.2, the findings depicted the activity systems of the PLs' course design and reported five main categories in the activity framework – *Tools, Object, Rules, Division of labour,* and *Outcomes*. The *Tools* being viewed in the PLs' activity system were the LMS and social media. The LMS mode was considered as a repository for learning resources to enable students' access to subject knowledge and to develop students' learning autonomy. According to the PLs, social media was used as a communicational tool by the teachers and the students in the EBCs as a result of the lack of an interactive forum within the current LMS. The *Object* of PLs' design activity was driven by their positive belief of blended learning as an innovative EFL teaching and learning approach although the PLs were not informed explicitly about the purposes and the implementation of blended learning from the university. The findings about *Rules* in the PLs' design activity system revealed that the design of EBCs was influenced by the top-down directives and regulated by the PLs' experiences of instructional design principles. With respect to *Division of Labour*, the PLs also emphasized the need for changing roles of both teachers and students in a blended environment and minimizing the

negative impact of student-teacher power relations on teacher-student interaction in English classes. In terms of the *Outcomes* of the adoption of blended learning, the PLs commented that students' learning achievement in the blended setting was limited due to some challenges related to technology factors, students themselves and teacher factors. However, from the PLs' views, the adoption of blended learning encouraged teachers to change their teaching methods positively.

Section 4.3 described the activity system of the teachers' teaching activity and reported five key elements in the activity framework – *Tools, Object, Rules, Division of labour and Outcomes.* In the teachers' activity system, most of the teachers did not consider a blended learning approach as a pedagogical change. Instead, they appeared to view the blended learning approach as the combination of online and face-to-face components or the integration of technology in learning. They used the LMS, and social media as physical *Tools,* which mediated interactions between teacher, student and subject knowledge. The *Rules* regulating teachers' teaching in EBCs included institutional requirements about administrative demands and the English assessment framework. The institutional rules tended to force teachers to take control of students' learning rather than encouraging teachers to empower students. Regarding the *Division of Labour,* the teachers appeared to facilitate students' online and face-to-face learning by creating a supportive learning environment; encouraging collaborative learning; giving feedback and enabling students' ability to control their learning. When explaining the reasons behind using blended learning, as the *Object* of the teachers' activity system, the teachers indicated potential benefits of blended learning for students, themselves and their institution. The teachers commented that the positive outcome of the adoption of blended learning was students' improvement in vocabularies and speaking skills while the negative outcome was students' low performance in listening and reading skills at the end of blended courses. There appeared, too, a need for more formal training to design or teach in blended modes for both PLs and teachers. These findings will be discussed with reference to the literature in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER FIVE: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES OF ENGLISH BLENDED COURSES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter, in two sections, presents findings about students' perspectives of English blended courses (EBCs) from two student data sources: an online survey and interviews. First, in section 5.2, the results of online survey provide a broad understanding of factors that students perceived as having important influences on their English learning in a blended environment. Second, in section 5.3, the findings from the student interviews reveal the critical factors emerging from the survey to provide a richer depth and understanding of the influences. In section 5.3, findings are arranged into themes corresponding to elements of the Activity Theory framework.

5.2 Students' perspectives of English blended courses: online survey findings

5.2.1 Students' demographic information

Demographic information establishes a baseline set of information about the student participant cohort in relation to: gender, degree, years of studying English, computer skills, preference for devices and previous experience with online learning technologies.

Three hundred and thirty-nine students from three university faculties responded to the first section of the survey, being about 28% of the total population of students in these faculties. The descriptive statistics showed that approximately two thirds more females than males took the survey. Approximately half were from Faculty A, about a third from Faculty C, and about 20% were students from Faculty B. Table 5.1 presents more details about demographic information on participants.

Table 5.1. *Distribution of gender and faculty in the sample*

Faculty	**Gender**		**Total**
	Female	Male	Frequency/Percent
Faculty A	130	19	149 (44%)
Faculty B	9	64	73 (21.5%)
Faculty C	97	20	117 (34.5%)
Total	236 (69.6%)	103 (30.4%)	339 (100 %)

At the time of data collection, nearly half of the participants have studied English between six and ten years, about a third have studied English between eleven and fifteen years while a small percent studied English for over fifteen years (see table 5.2).

Table 5.2. *Years of studying English*

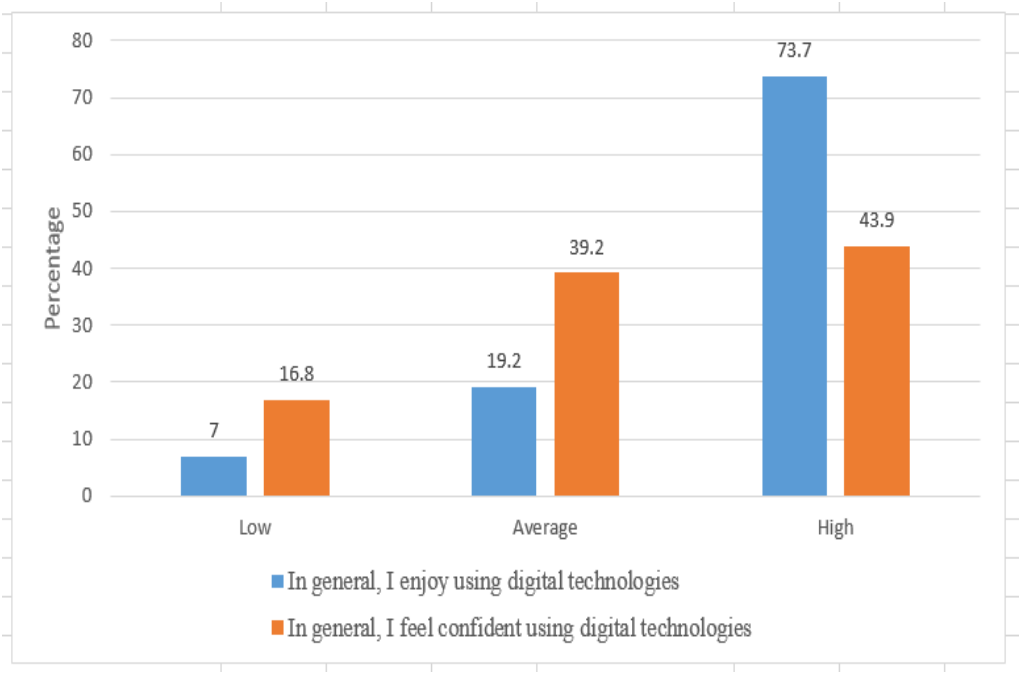
Years	**Frequency**	**Percent**
0-5	63	18.6
6-10	154	45.4
11-15	114	33.6
15+	8	2.4
Total	339	100.0

Students were then asked about their use of mobile and computational devices in studying English online. As shown in Table 5.3, smartphone (47.4%), and laptop (36 %) ranked among the highest choices of devices. Desktop computer (12.8%) was ranked as the third option, and the use of tablet (1.6 %), iPad (1.6%) and iPod (0.6%) for studying English featured minimally. Thus, it can be assumed that smartphones were most used to study English online because these are devices that students carry with them every day. Also, smartphones tend to provide students more opportunities to learn, create, share, and collaborate anywhere and at any time.

Table 5.3. *Devices used to study English online*

	Responses	
Devices	**N**	**Percent**
Desktop computer	80	12.8%
Laptop	224	36.0%
Tablet	10	1.6%
Ipod	4	0.6%
Ipad	10	1.6%
Smartphone	295	47.4%
Total	623	100.0%

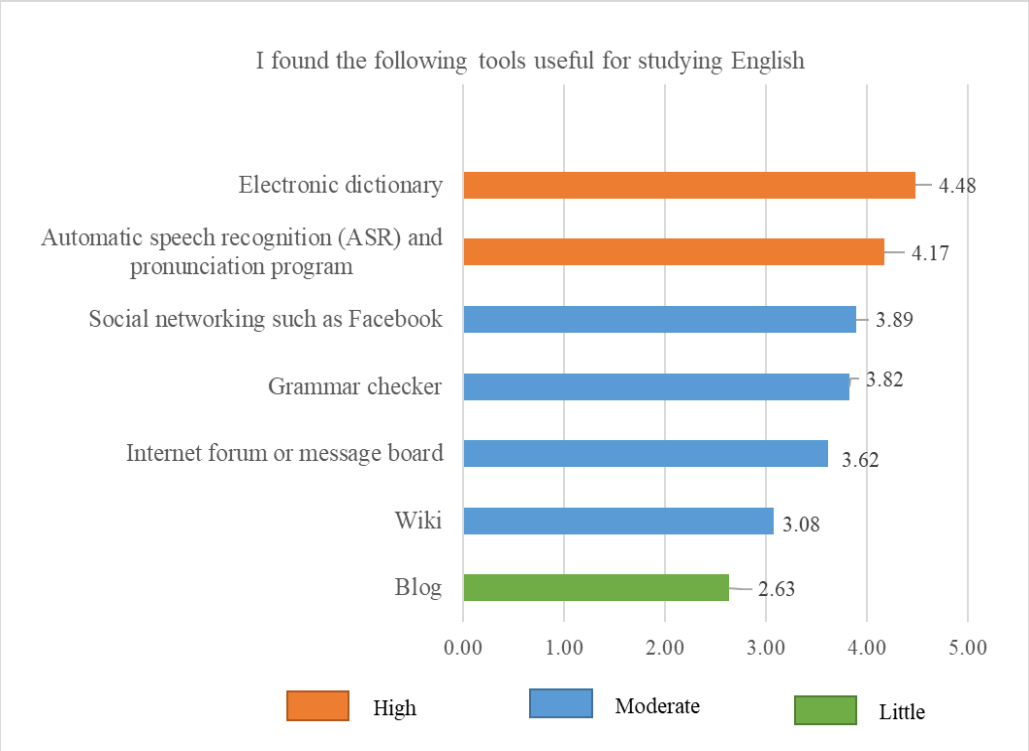
The next section of the survey asked students to rate their degree of enjoyment and confidence in using digital technologies in general from 1 to 5. A self-rating of 1 or 2 was categorized as low enjoyment or confidence, a 3 was categorized as an average, and a 4 or 5 were categorized as high. The following bar chart (see Figure 5.1) shows that a majority of students (73.7%) really enjoyed using digital technologies while only 7% of students did not like using those technologies. Nearly half of respondents (43.9%) felt capable using digital technologies, and less than 20% of respondents lacked confidence with their technology skills. In general, those who largely enjoyed using digital technologies were likely to feel confident in doing so.



Note: Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree 5=strongly agree

Figure 5.1. Students' degree of their digital technology enjoyment and confidence

Figure 5.2 below presents descriptive statistics of the data about the perceived usefulness of different tools for studying English. As can be seen, students reported using a wide range of tools, and they found an electronic dictionary highly useful for their English study. Based on the mean of each item, tools were categorised to reflect the level of usefulness to students. The highest and lowest mean values were 4.48 (Electronic dictionary) and 2.63 (Blog) respectively so I used these values as limits to approximately group the tools. Tools were classified into three main groups. Tools with a mean between 4 and 5 ($4 \leq M < 5$) were characterised as highly useful tools, those with a mean between 3 and 4 ($3 \leq M < 4$) were labelled as moderately useful tools while tools with a mean between 2 and 3 ($2 \leq M < 3$) were assigned as least useful.



Note: Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree 5=strongly agree

Figure 5.2. Categorisation of the usefulness of tools based on their mean

To summarize, the majority of the participants were women. Nearly half of the participants had been studying English for several years, from 6 to 10 years. Most of the participants like using digital technologies and prefer using smartphones when studying English online. The participants also ranked individual studying tools such as e-dictionaries and pronunciation applications as the most useful tools for their English study. It suggests that when studying online, students appeared to value online self-informational tools (e-dictionaries) rather than interactional tools (wikis or blogs) that could help them to create meaning, negotiate meaning, and enhance interaction.

5.2.2 Students' perceptions of English blended courses

Thirty-seven items in section three of the online survey asked students' general perceptions of their English blended courses (EBCs). The answers were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 4-agree, and 5 indicated strongly agree. Responses to those 37 different items seem driven by a few underlying structures/factors (main themes). The process of generating factors/main themes was presented in the data

analysis section in Chapter 3 (see section 3.8.1). The results of this analysis revealed five main factors, which students perceived as being important to their English learning in a blended learning environment. These factors included: *Content and design features, Teachers' roles, Challenges of blended learning, Classroom norms and Benefits of blended learning*.

In this section, I used descriptive statistics analysis to provide a detailed picture of how students felt about the issues in relation to five main factors/subthemes. First, basic descriptive statistics of five extracted factors such as mean and standard deviation are displayed in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4. *Mean and Standard Deviation for the Five Extracted Factors*

	N	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
Factor 1: Content and design features	339	3.86	0.782
Factor 2: Teachers' roles	339	3.98	0.867
Factor 3: Challenges of blended learning	339	2.82	0.950
Factor 4: Classroom norms	339	3.17	0.783
Factor 5: Benefits of blended learning	339	3.50	0.900

Note: Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 4-agree, 5-strongly agree

Overall, Table 5.4 demonstrates that students not only felt that teachers facilitated and guided their study in their EBCs but also felt uncertain about challenges of studying in that environment. The mean score of 3.86 for *Content and design features* indicates that students generally agreed on the appropriateness of the content and structure of their blended courses. The standard deviation of this factor was the smallest (*SD*=0.782) among the five, showing that this score did not differ much among students. The *Classroom norms* factor, a mean score of 3.17 (*SD*=0.783) shows that most students were unlikely to interact and cooperate with teachers and peers during their English courses. In addition, the *Benefits of blended learning* factor with a mean of 3.50 (*SD*=0.900) implies that students somewhat agreed that a blended mode brought them benefits. Each factor together with percentage, mean, mode and standard deviation for each item that makes up

that factor, is presented as follows.

5.2.2.1 Students' perceptions of content and design features

The basic descriptive statistics of the *Content and design features* theme such as percentage, mean, mode and standard deviation are displayed in Table 5.5 below.

Table 5.5. *Percentage, Mean, Mode and Standard Deviation for Items of Content and design features (N=339)*

No	**Factor 1: Content and design features** (9 items)	SD (%)	D (%)	NAD (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Mode	Std. Deviation
26	The learning objectives were clearly stated in each class lesson.	1.8	5	13.3	47.2	32.7	4.04	4	.906
25	The online and classroom activities worked well together.	2.4	2.7	18.2	47.5	29.2	3.99	4	.892
30	Expectations of classroom tasks were clearly stated.	3.5	5.3	18.3	41.3	31.6	3.92	4	1.013
32	The presentation of the English course content was clear.	1.9	6.2	20.9	44.2	26.8	3.88	4	.935
29	Expectations of online tasks were clearly stated.	2.9	6.2	18.7	44.8	27.4	3.88	4	.980
31	The content of the English courses was appropriate for delivery in a blended learning environment.	4.4	4.4	22.4	38.1	30.7	3.86	4	1.044
27	The organization of each online lesson was easy to follow.	2.4	8.8	18.9	46	23.9	3.80	4	.979
28	The organization of each classroom lesson is easy to follow.	2.4	7.4	21.4	49.6	19.2	3.76	4	.927
24	There was a good balance between online and classroom activities.	3.5	8	27.4	42.2	18.9	3.65	4	.990

Note: Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree (SD); 2-disagree (D); 3-neither agree nor disagree (NAD); 4-agree (A); 5-strongly agree (SA), Number=No

Overall, table 5.5 demonstrates that students expressed a higher degree of agreement on the clarity of lesson objectives and task requirements than the appropriateness of course content and course organization. A mode score of 4 for each item in Factor 1 confirms that the majority of respondents reported their agreement on every item of that factor. In terms of course objectives, high mean

responses for items No. 26 (*M*=4.04, *SD*=.906), No. 30 (*M*=3.92, *SD*=1.013), and No. 29 (*M*=3.88, *SD*=.980) indicate that the majority of students (>70%) felt they were clearly communicated about aims of each lesson and aims of each learning task in their courses. Regarding course organization, mean ratings for items No. 32, No. 27, No. 28 are 3.88, 3.80 and 3.76 respectively demonstrated that broadly, students felt online and offline learning activities and content were presented clearly. Particularly, a total of 71% of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that the presentation of the course content was clear for them while more than 68% of students indicated that the organization of both online and class lessons was easy for them to follow. These responses contributed to high mean responses to item No. 25 (*M*= 3.99, *SD*=.892) and item No. 31 (*M*=3.86, *SD*= 1.044). More specifically, more than 75% of the students agreed that online and face-to-face activities enhanced each other while nearly 70% thought that the content of the course was suitable for them to study in a blended environment. However, a low mean score for item No. 24 (*M*=3.65, *SD*=.990) shows that students were a little less certain about the balance between online and face-to-face activities in their blended courses. Overall, 27.4 % of all students held contrasting views regarding the balance between online and classroom activities.

5.2.2.2 Students' perceptions of classroom norms

Overall, student ratings (see table 5.6) indicate students' uncertain views of issues relating to their interaction and collaboration with teachers and other students. More than a third of the participants had contrasting views regarding all the items of the *Classroom norms* factor**.** A mode of 3 and a mean ≈ of approximately 3 for items No. 16, No. 15, and No. 17 indicated students' greatest level of uncertainty about those items. Specifically, nearly a half of the students were mixed in their response as to whether or not their peers responded promptly to their requests for help while roughly 40% perhaps could not decide if teachers guided them to undertake self-evaluation or peer feedback during their learning process. The mean of 3.60 for item No. 14 is higher than the mean for item No. 13 (M=3.25), implying that students might feel more comfortable interacting with peers rather than with teachers.

Table 5.6. *Percentage, Mean, Mode and Standard Deviation for items of Classroom norms (N=339)*

No	**Factor 2: Classroom norms** (5 items)	SD (%)	D (%)	NAD (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Mode	Std. Deviation
14	I had the freedom to ask other students what I did not understand.	3.5	9.4	30.8	35.7	20.6	3.60	4	1.028
13	I had the freedom to ask my teacher what I did not understand.	7.1	16.5	36.3	24.5	15.6	3.25	3	1.122
16	I was regularly asked to evaluate my own work.	8.3	19.5	42.4	22.1	7.7	3.01	3	1.028
15	Other students responded promptly to my requests for help.	6.8	19.2	47.5	21.2	5.3	2.99	3	0.944
17	My classmates and I were asked to evaluate each other's work.	10.6	19.8	39.8	22.1	7.7	2.96	3	1.074

Note: Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree (SD); 2-disagree (D); 3-neither agree nor disagree (NAD); 4-agree (A); 5-strongly agree (SA), Number=No

5.2.2.3 Students' perceptions of teachers' roles

As can be seen in table 5.7, students generally agreed across the faculties' EBCs, that they benefited from teachers' facilitation of their learning. For example, regarding item No. 33, a mode of 5 (M=4.19, SD=0.957) indicates that many students (45.4%) strongly felt that teachers motivated them to cooperate with peers while learning. Similarly, a mode of 5 for item No. 36 signalled that nearly half of the students strongly believed that teachers were willing to help them with their questions and most of the rest also agreed with this. A mode of 4 for items No. 34, No. 35 and No. 37 also indicates that generally teachers had an important role in providing students with better learning opportunities and quick feedback as well as keeping them engaged in class activities.

Table 5.7. *Percentage, Mean, Mode and Standard Deviation for items of Teachers' roles (N=339)*

No	**Factor 3: Teachers' roles** (5 items)	SD (%)	D (%)	NAD (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Mode	Std. Deviation
33	The teacher encouraged students to work together and help each other.	2.4	4.1	11.5	36.6	45.4	4.19	5	0.957
36	The teacher was ready to answer my questions.	2.4	5	13.3	33.6	45.7	4.15	5	0.991
34	The teacher provided opportunities for me to learn in different ways.	2.7	6.5	17	42.5	28.9	3.93	4	0.990
37	The teacher kept students engaged in studying English during class time.	2.6	6.8	19.2	42.5	28.9	3.88	4	0.990
35	The teacher gave me quick feedback on my work.	4.1	8.3	22.4	38.9	26.3	3.75	4	1.063

Note: Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree (SD); 2-disagree (D); 3-neither agree nor disagree (NAD); 4-agree (A); 5-strongly agree (SA), Number=No

5.2.2.4 Students' perceptions of benefits of blended learning

As can be seen from table 5.8, most students (more than half) showed their broad agreement about benefits of the blended learning environment. The same mode score (Mo=4), and a mean score≈ of approximately 3.50 for items No. 21, No. 22 and No. 18 indicate that the majority of students (more than a third) believed the blended learning environment somehow enhanced their motivation, engagement, and satisfaction in English courses. Regarding item No. 19, a mode of 3 implies that more students (34.6 %) expressed a neutral idea about whether or not doing groupwork in a blended environment was easy for them than those who reported their strong agreement (17.7%) or disagreement (4.1%).

Table 5.8. *Percentage, Mean, Mode and Standard Deviation for items of Benefits of blended learning (N=339)*

No	**Factor 4: Benefits of blended learning** (4 items)	SD (%)	D (%)	NAD (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Mode	Std. Deviation
21	The blended learning environment made me motivated to learn English.	4.1	9.4	32.3	38.9	15.3	3.52	4	0.998
22	The blended learning environment kept me engaged in studying English.	4.4	12.4	33	34.3	15.9	3.45	4	1.040
18	I felt a sense of satisfaction about the blended learning environment.	5.9	9.4	30.1	36.3	18.3	3.52	4	1.078
19	It was easy to work together with other students involved in group work in the blended learning environment.	4.1	10.3	34.6	33.3	17.7	3.50	3	1.030

Note: Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree (SD); 2-disagree (D); 3-neither agree nor disagree (NAD); 4-agree (A); 5-strongly agree (SA), Number=No

5.2.2.5 Students' perceptions of challenges of blended learning

In general, Table 5.9 shows that students expressed their uncertainty in relation to challenges in their blended courses, indicating their contrasting views of challenges they faced while studying in a blended environment. A same mode of 3 and a mean ≈ of approximately 3 for items No. 42, No. 43, and No. 41 showed that students expressed the greatest uncertainty to those items. Moreover, more than a third of the students believed that they faced challenges such as feeling anxious and overwhelmed and difficulties in time management while only a fifth of them thought they felt isolated in the courses or struggled using the digital technologies to study. Interestingly, under half of students were not sure if the amount of information and resources in their English courses was too much for them.

Table 5.9. *Percentage, Mean, Mode and Standard Deviation for items of Challenges of blended learning (N=339)*

No	**Factor 5: Challenges of blended learning** (5 items)	SD (%)	D (%)	NAD (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Mode	Std. Deviation
42	I felt anxious in my English courses at the university.	12.1	17.4	33.6	25.4	11.5	3.07	3	1.171
43	I faced difficulties in managing my time in my English courses at the university.	13.9	14.4	36	22.7	13	3.06	3	1.202
41	I was overwhelmed with information and resources in my English courses at the university.	10.9	14.5	41.9	23	9.7	3.06	3	1.096
45	I had difficulties in using digital technologies to study in my English courses at the university.	27.1	21.8	33	12.7	5.4	2.47	3	1.170
44	I felt isolated during my English courses at the university.	31.3	21.5	25.6	14.2	7.4	2.45	1	1.266

Note: Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree (SD); 2-disagree (D); 3-neither agree nor disagree (NAD); 4-agree (A); 5-strongly agree (SA), Number=No

In short, the results of EFA analysis revealed five critical factors that students believed as having influences on their English learning in their blended courses. Those important factors were treated as main subthemes: *Content and design features; Teachers' roles; Classroom norms; Benefits of blended learning and Challenges of blended learning*

5.2.2.6 Relationships between key themes/factors

Five key themes/factors that the students perceived as having influences on their English learning were then mapped onto the Activity Theory framework (see Figure 5.3) to examine the relationship between the five themes. The factor, *Content and Design features*, refers to *Tools* element while the factor, *Classroom norms*, relates to *Rules* element. *Division of labour* concerns the *Teachers' roles* in EBCs, and the factor, *Benefits of blended learning*, fits into *Object* element. The last factor, *Challenges of blended learning*, reveals tensions/contradictions between *Subjects* (students)-*Tools* (blended learning courses) and *Division of*

labour (students' roles). These contradictions are further discussed in section 6.1.3 of chapter 6.

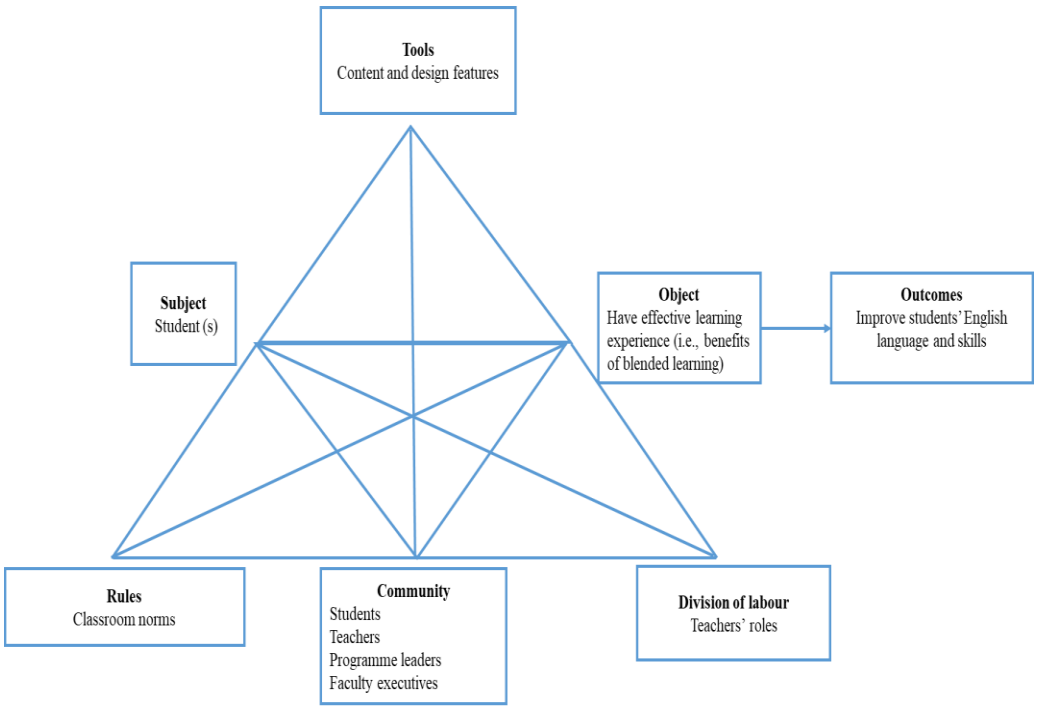


Figure 5.3. Students' learning activity system - online survey findings

Given my assumption that the factors/themes should be related to one another, a Pearson-product moment correlation test was conducted to further understand the relationship between the five themes. Table 5.10 below provides information on the magnitude of the correlation, the direction of the correlation (positive and negative) and the significance level.

Table 5.10. *Correlations among the five factors*

Correlations					
		Teachers' roles	**Challenges of blended learning**	**Classroom norms**	**Benefits of blended learning**
Content and design features	Pearson Correlation	.741**	.041	.509**	.641**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.447	.000	.000
Teachers' roles	Pearson Correlation	1.000**	.122*	.493**	.552**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.025	.000	.000
Challenges of blended learning	Pearson Correlation	.122*	1.000**	.058	-.026
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.025	.000	.291	.634
Classroom norms	Pearson Correlation	.493**	.058	1.000**	.612**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.291	.000	.000

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5.10 indicates that a statistically significant and positive correlation was found between every pair of the five factors ($.122 \leq r \leq .741$, $p \leq .05$, 2-tailed). Six of the seven correlations among these dimensions were at a high level, indicating a common ground shared by those factors. There were strongly positive correlations between Tools - *Content and design features* and Division of labour - *Teachers' roles* (r =.741, p =.01), and Object - *Benefits of blended learning* (r=.641, p=.01). Rules - *Classroom norms* correlated positively and more strongly with Object - *Benefits of blended learning* (r = .612, p = .01) than with Division of labour - *Teachers' roles* (r = .493, p = .01). The correlation between *Challenges of blended learning* and *Teachers' roles* was weak (r=.122, p=.05) suggesting that challenges/difficulties faced by students when they studied in English blended courses were somehow not associated with *Teachers' roles* in those blended courses.

In short, figure 5.4 illustrates the relationships between elements of the students' activity system based on the online survey results. The online survey results indicated strong interactions between *Content and design features* (Tools), *Classroom norms* (Rules) and *Teachers' roles* (Division of labour). These interactions are further unpacked in section 6.1.3, chapter 6.

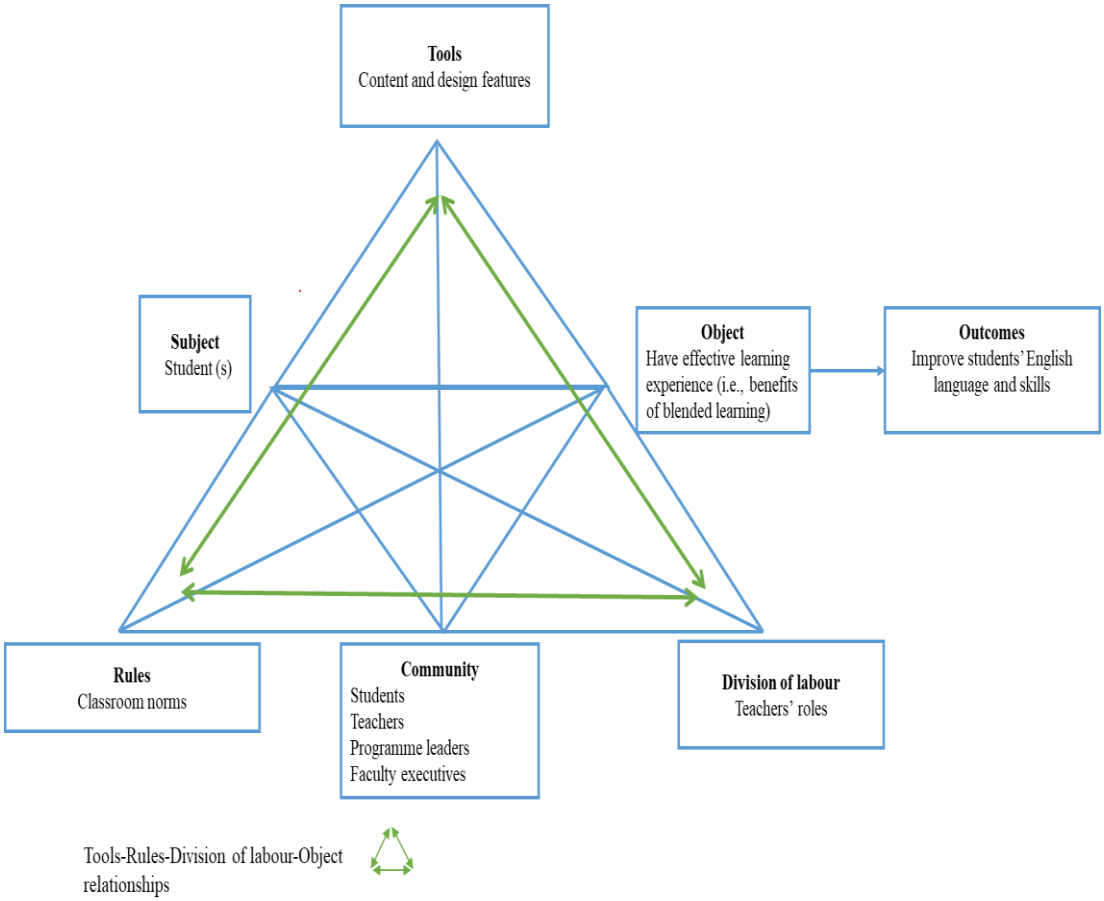


Figure 5.4. Relationships among elements of the students' activity system

In summary, the analysis procedure of the student online survey identified five factors/themes that students perceived as affecting their learning of English in a blended environment. The main factors were identified using a multiphase factor analysis with appropriate integrations of reliability and validity processes. The five extracted factors, treated as main themes, were named respectively *Content and design features* (9 items), *Teachers' roles* (5 items), *Challenges of blended learning* (5 items), *Classroom norms* (5 items), and *Benefits of blended learning* (4 items). They accounted for a total of 68.881 percent of the total variance explained. The internal consistency of the five factors was .935, .918, .862, .808, and .891 respectively, confirming the reliability of the instrument. These five key factors were also related to one another.

5.3 Students' perspectives of English blended courses: interview findings

This section reports on the qualitative findings of interview with seven students (two males and five females) across three faculties in the study context about their perceptions of their English blended courses (EBCs). All of the students were in the second-year of their degree, and have been studying English for more than ten years. The following figure (Figure 5.5) represents the Activity Theory Framework applied to the students' learning activity in EBCs.

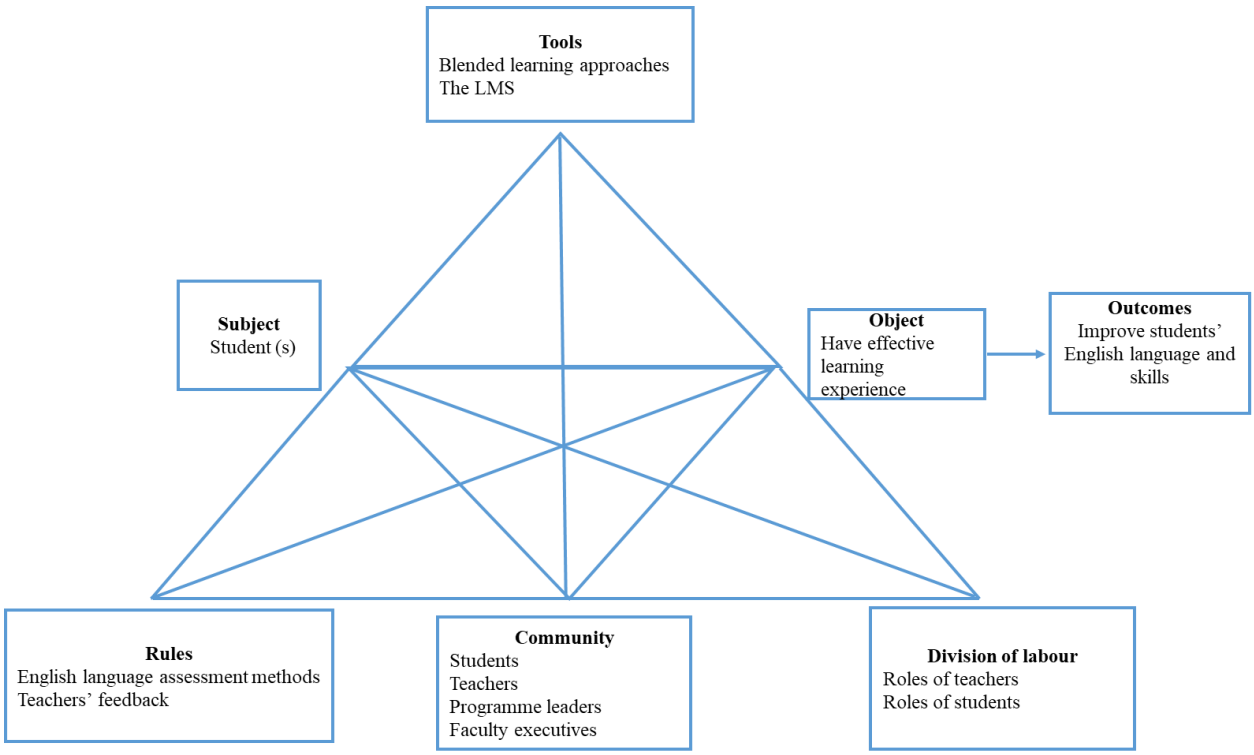


Figure 5.5. Students' learning activity system - interview findings

Four main components of the students' learning activity system are discussed in turn: *Tools*, *Rules*, *Division of Labour* and *Outcomes.*

5.3.1 Tools

In the students' activity system, *Tools* element refers to how the students understood the blended learning environment and used blended learning tools

(such as the LMS) to study English. The student data indicated two main themes: students' understanding of a blended learning environment and students' use of the LMS

5.3.1.1 Understanding of a blended learning environment

Firstly, data show that the student participants understood and interpreted the term *blended learning* in different ways. Four of the seven students defined blended learning as a combination of face-to-face and online learning. One of them indicated his clear understanding of this term, saying: "I understand this learning method [blended learning] is to integrate two forms of learning that are learning in class with teacher's guidance and studying from home using the internet" (Tan, student interview 3). Tan also explained that since his teacher clearly explained what blended learning was, he and students in his class "knew exactly what they were required to do in English blended courses".

However, the three other students reported that they did not know about the term *blended learning* and only guessed about its meaning based on their own experience. For example, Ha (student interview 5) related blended learning as having "to study by myself at home" through "online, friends or even by making friends with foreigners". Meanwhile, Ngan thought blended learning is somehow similar to e-learning, saying:

> Blended learning is like studying English online by doing things such as watching movies or reading newspapers in English online. (Ngan, student interview 2)

Another participant (Trinh, student interview 7) referred to blended learning as a mixture of various teaching and learning methods. She explained:

> It [blended learning] is the integration of different forms of teaching and learning. For example, at the school, there was a combination of classroom learning methods with teachers, and studying online plus doing tests. (Trinh, student interview 7)

When being asked about *blended learning*, Cuong talked about this approach in terms of his feelings rather than giving a definition, saying:

> I only have one year experiencing this method [blended learning] but I felt that it [blended learning] was quite interesting. The online learning activities in the university LMS helped us [himself and other students] revise knowledge, remember more knowledge and practice more exercises. Therefore, we understand the lesson better. (Cuong, student interview 1).

In short, the participating students hold different views of blended learning. This suggests a need for helping students to have a comprehensive understanding of what the blended learning environment is and to distinguish blended learning from e-learning. In order to improve students' understanding of other interview questions, I explained during the interviews the *blended learning* term as a purposeful combination of face-to-face and online learning to students those who had a different understanding of this term.

5.3.1.2 Use of the LMS

Four of the seven students perceived that the LMS provided them with information and practices of the English language knowledge, which helped enhance their face-to-face learning. For example, Cuong stated:

> I found the flexibility of blended courses when I could study and practice online activities in the LMS as much as I wanted…Therefore, I absorbed and remembered more knowledge and skills through online study, which in turn helped me make better use of the face-to-face time. (Cuong, student interview 1)

Similarly, Tan (student interview 3) emphasized the important role of the university LMS in making the learning materials available and accessible for students, saying:

> The online part in the LMS helped me to prepare for my learning in the face-to-face class, so I could understand and perform speaking activities more fluently and confidently. (Tan, student interview 3)

As noted in Cuong's and Tan's comments, the LMS in the university could benefit students because it allowed them to access to learning resources, study, practice and revise knowledge at any time prior to face-to-face classes.

However, the students reported different challenges they faced while studying online via the LMS. Firstly, three of the seven student participants complained about the design of online materials in the LMS. For example, Minh felt that the

length of reading texts in the LMS made it hard for her to follow and complete online reading activities, saying:

> I don't like studying reading skills online because I am bored with reading too long passages. It was hard to read long texts and complete reading tasks on the computer screen. I had to move the mouse cursor and roll pages up and down to complete reading tasks. That way couldn't help to develop my reading skills at all. (Minh, student interview 4)

Another participant, Ngan (student interview 2) did not enjoy doing writing practice. She felt demotivated because of the way in which the LMS produced automated responses. She said in her interview:

> I hate writing tasks most because whenever I forget a question mark, an exclamation or a letter capitalization, I will lose my scores of writing tasks. The LMS function is not flexible enough, and it needs a constant update. (Ngan, student interview 2).

Minh's and Ngan's comments raised a question to the instructional design approach to online reading and writing activities. This indicates a need to consider how online reading and writing activities were designed in the LMS, and to what extent such activities reflected good language teaching and learning principles.

Secondly, two out of the seven students were not happy with the volume and level of grammar being presented in the LMS, and were frustrated that they were still unable to produce the target language despite such familiar input. For example, Ha said:

> There are too many grammar structures that I learned a lot before at high school and now I studied again and again at university via the LMS, but I still couldn't use those complex grammar structures in communication. It's impractical to digest all the grammar, and I am not able to use it in real-life situations". (Ha, student interview 5)

Similarly, Cuong (student interview 1), stated that he sometimes "felt pressured and stressed because of the overload of online grammar knowledge and exercises". He explained that his major was not English, and he also needed to spend time studying other subjects rather than English. He also wondered if he would use all that grammar knowledge in his real-life communication.

Ha's and Cuong's quotes imply that they felt overwhelmed with the quantity of grammar structures delivered online and appeared not to be able to use that knowledge communicatively in real-life contexts.

Thirdly, four out of seven students complained about technical issues they faced while doing online learning activities and online unit tests in the LMS, which made them feel demotivated. Trinh stated:

> While doing online unit tests, I faced some problems such as the lost internet connection or the problems of the LMS system…As a consequence, I couldn't do the test again because the test time was over. I was so anxious and felt unfocused and demotivated when that situation happened, but I couldn't do anything because of the system issues. (Trinh, student interview 7)

Likewise, Ha (student interview 5) shared her disappointment and anxiety when facing technical issues, saying:

> It was terrible when the university LMS was slow and went down while I was doing online learning activities. Sometimes, I didn't know why I was automatically logged out while taking a very important online test. The system submitted my answers while I still had half an hour to complete the test…and, as you know, my answers were recorded, and I couldn't do it again. So, I lost my scores and felt disappointed and anxious. (Ha, student interview 5)

Overall, the students reported their different understandings of a blended learning environment. They also believed that the current LMS in their institution had both affordances and constraints. On the one hand, they perceived that the LMS assisted them in accessing the learning contents and practicing English language knowledge and English language skills. On the other hand, several constraints relating to the design of online reading and writing activities, the amount of content in the LMS, and technical issues seemed to challenge their English learning.

5.3.2 Rules

In the students' activity system, the *Rules* element relates to students' perceptions and experiences of the current English language assessment methods at their institution, and teachers' feedback.

5.3.2.1 English continuous assessment

Reflecting on the effectiveness of the current English continuous assessment in their university, all of the participating students believed that in-class tests were fairer and provided more accurate information about students' English proficiency than online tests in the LMS. For example, Minh found the in-class tests valuable as they were completed under observations, saying:

> Oral tests and written tests in classes are more effective than online unit tests because students had to take these tests under teachers' surveillance. (Minh, student interview 4)

Likewise, Tan (student interview 3) strongly agreed the importance of face-to-face speaking tests in class, commenting:

> I highly appreciate continuous in-class oral assessment because this type of test format can actually evaluate students' English ability. Meanwhile, online unit tests mainly focus on testing knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. (Tan, student interview 3)

Thanh (student interview 6) explained that she thought the online tests were not as effective as oral tests because she found the automated feedback online was limited. She said:

> I think in-class oral tests might better assess students' English learning than online tests. When I finish doing an online test, the LMS will only show the total scores of the test but not point out where is right or wrong, so those tests are not really effective in helping my learning. (Thanh, student interview 6)

Moreover, four of the seven students reported their concerns about the fairness of the online test format. Cuong (student interview 1) was really annoyed about other students' cheating while taking online tests via the LMS. He pointed out:

> Some students asked their friends to do online unit tests for them [students]. Other students just copy answers without really doing online tasks. Their purposes were to get high scores and completion percentages for attending the final exam at the end of semester…It was unfair for those who study hard and actively like me. (Cuong, student interview 1)

Similarly, Ngan (student interview 2) raised issues of students' cheating while having online unit tests, potentially leading to the lack of reliability of that test type. She commented:

> For me, in-class written tests are more reliable than online tests because students cheated when doing online tests such as copying answers or working with peers to complete online tests. (Ngan, student interview 2)

In short, among different types of summative tests, the participating students appeared to value oral tests and in-class written tests more than the online test format. The reliability of the online test format seems to be limited and negatively influenced since several students are reported to have cheated while doing this type of test. This highlights a need to review the assessment design for the online learning component in the participants' institution.

5.3.2.2 Teacher's feedback

The students also commented on the quantity and the quality of feedback they received in their EBCs. Five out of the seven students highly appreciated when their lecturers provided non-evaluative feedback about students' face-to-face speaking performances. Reflecting on her own experience, Trinh (student interview 7) felt satisfied with her teacher's practices of giving feedback, saying:

> He [the teacher] first elaborated on good points and bad points of our speaking performances in class. When I spoke wrong pronunciation, I felt stressed and pressured because other classmates laughed a lot, but my teacher was helpful, and he corrected my pronunciation and grammar mistakes in an encouraging way. I didn't feel his judgment and his attitudes were supportive. I felt so comfortable with his feedback.

Trinh's quote suggests that her teachers' feedback seemed to focus on correcting pronunciation and grammar mistakes, and was constructive because it helped her overcome her lack of confidence.

Another student (Tan, student interview 3) described his teacher's practice of giving feedback at the task level, which consisted of three phases. Prior to assigning students a speaking task, Tan's teacher clearly outlined task objectives and addressed all students' academic inquiries and concerns. During the task, the teacher continued to provide on-going assistance and directed students' performance toward achieving desired learning outcomes. On task completion, the teacher offered students constructive feedback to help them to improve their

learning performance. Tan also had a positive view of feedback that he received for his speaking activities:

> My teacher's feedback is detailed about the pronunciation and grammar structures, and I can learn much from her feedback. (Tan, student interview 3)

Tan's teacher's practice of giving oral corrective feedback was constructive in relation to the speaking task-level performance and to what Tan may do to improve in the future.

However, five out of the seven students stated that teachers' feedback for online activities was irregular compared to regular feedback for speaking face-to-face activities. For example, Ngan said:

> Teachers' feedback on the problems that students encounter when learning online is not timely, and it doesn't immediately resolve students' problems. (Ngan, student interview 2)

Another student, Thanh (student interview 6) also complained about the lack of feedback for students' online learning activities. She responded:

> Feedback from the teacher is really important, but we didn't have feedback on online activities. If I don't know my mistakes, how I can learn and improve. We do a lot of online practice, so I need explanation and clarification for my wrong answers. (Thanh, student interview 6)

These above extracts suggest a lack in teachers' feedback to students' online learning. This is, perhaps, due to the limitation of the LMS mode, in which teachers have no opportunities for commenting about students' online learning, and where most of the feedback answers were automated.

Another complaint is about the quality of feedback for writing activities. Cuong (student interview 1) showed his dissatisfaction and said:

> Sometimes, I didn't know why I got a bad mark for my writing assignment. I need positive comments on where I did well as well as guidance for future improvement on parts that I did not do really well, rather than a statement of where the work was inadequate. I need feedback that can help for what part I should improve in the future.

Cuong's quote suggests three concerns regarding teachers' feedback. Firstly, Cuong did not understand the relationship between the feedback comments and the grade. Secondly, he felt that the feedback did not show him what to do in order to improve his work. Lastly, he may not clearly understand the feedback comments, or the assessment criteria was unclear.

Likewise, Minh felt dissatisfied with his teacher's feedback regarding writing tasks and raised issues of not fully understanding comments because those comments lacked clarity and purpose. He pointed:

> My teacher's feedback on my writing was too generic and not valuable for me. She often showed or underlined where I made errors or giving too general suggestions. For example, she commented "you should use more complex and compound sentences to make your paragraphs better or use connectors, but I didn't really understand why I needed to write complex and compound sentences and where to put connectors. Thus, I couldn't improve my writing with that help. (Minh, student interview 4)

In short, data in this regard reveals a number of issues relating to how feedback was given to students' online work, the extent to which teachers gave comprehensible feedback, and students' ability to understand and use feedback to improve learning.

5.3.3 Division of labour

The *Division of labour* element defines the role of students and teachers in EBCs. There are two main themes under this element including: teachers' roles in EBCs; and students' roles in EBCs.

5.3.3.1 Teachers' roles in blended courses

The student interview findings indicated that teachers used some strategies to facilitate students' online and face-to-face learning.

Firstly, all of the students mentioned that their teachers regularly used online reports to monitor their completion of online learning tasks. For example, Tan said:

> My teacher exports an excel sheet report and shows the online report in every face-to-face class every week. A report consists of information about students' names, tasks completed and the total time for online completion. He [the teacher] also keeps reminding us to finish incomplete online tasks to be eligible to take the final examination according to the course requirements. (Tan, student interview 3)

Similarly, Cuong (student interview 1) believed that the online reports helped teachers to monitor students' participation into online learning, saying:

> In the beginning of each face-to-face class, my teacher often shows us the online report. I can see the total time I spent on studying English online and what tasks I completed or what I have not completed. (Cuong, student interview 1)

As can be seen from the above responses, several teachers appeared to use online reports to monitor students' online participation, and their completion of online tasks for deciding students' eligibility to sit the final test rather than monitoring students' online learning.

Secondly, two out of the seven students reported that their teachers introduced some individual learning tools outside the LMS and encouraged them to use those online resources and tools for independent studying. For example, Ha (student interview 5) described how she studied English using videos embedded in the website 'learningenglish.voanews.com'.

> My teacher told me about VOA (Voice of America) English videos. She asked me to choose some videos for listening and reading after the recording, and imitating the speaker's pronunciation, intonation, and stress. (Ha, student interview 5)

Likewise, Minh (student interview 4) noted that her teacher advised her to make use of some individual studying tools such as "online dictionaries" or "digital audio recorder" to check her "pronunciation, intonation and word stress". Minh also believed that the dictionary and pronunciation practice will help her "speak English correctly" and "enable" her to "enrich vocabulary" (Minh, student interview 4).

The above excerpts suggest that the resources and tools such as an online dictionary, authentic videos, or a digital audio recorder were perhaps not well

integrated in the current LMS, so the teachers encouraged students to use these individual learning tools outside the LMS. This indicates a need to consider incorporating such tools in the LMS particularly given their value to enhance language learning.

Thirdly, the student data show that the teachers encouraged students to work collaboratively in face-to-face classes with other students in pairs or in groups. Such activities were mostly adopted from teachers' designed face-to-face teaching materials. The teachers sometimes created additional activities for students such as games or group work presentations. Students are then required to perform in front of the class after practicing language tasks in pairs or in groups. The following example illustrates typical comments made by students.

> My teacher encourages us [the student and his classmates] to actively participate in speaking activities by playing games. When learning with games, we [the student and his classmates] both feel excited and can revise our vocabulary (Tan, student interview 3)

In the interviews, 4/7 students indicated that in face-to-face sessions, teachers often group students of different levels together and assign them with a shared responsibility to complete a task. For example, Minh said

> When working in pairs and groups, teachers arrange high-level and low-level students to work in the same pairs or groups so that we can help each other. For example, a high-level student will be the leader in the group and give feedback to the other people in the group in terms of pronunciation, grammar structures and vocabulary. (Minh, student interview 4)

Minh's comment suggests that group work activities relied on the better students to assume leadership roles and give their peers feedback. Moreover, the feedback given after pair and group work activities seemed to focus on helping enhance students' linguistic features acquisition such as grammar rules and pronunciation.

In short, the teachers' facilitation of students' learning mainly focused on: monitoring student online task completion without identifying areas that need to be revisited in teaching; encouraging students to use online learning tools outside the LMS; and organizing pair work and group work activities.

5.3.3.2 Students' roles in blended courses

The student interview data show that most students (5/7) believed that self-regulation was important for their learning success. For example, Minh said:

> I know that self-regulated learning is important because in blended courses I mainly study by myself online. (Minh, student interview 4)

Similarly, Trinh (student interview 7) emphasised the role of self-regulation as a "key factor" for her English study online, which coincided with Thanh's view (student interview 6).

Regarding the self-regulation skills, only 2/7 students seemed to be engaged in planning their own learning. They demonstrated specific ways to achieve their established personal learning goals. For example, Trinh and Minh commented:

> I often write a list of learning goals I need to achieve at the beginning of the week. I check my list at the end of the week to see what goals I have completed and what goals I have not completed. In studying English, I did the same, for example, I wrote down all new words I need to study online in a book, then I studied and practiced throughout the week". (Trinh, student interview 7)

> For this semester, I wanted to get course grade A, so I tried to spend at least an hour per day listening to sources of English such as TV, songs and videos on YouTube. First, I learned to listen to main ideas, then listened for specific details and checked with tape scripts to find out what I couldn't hear and missed out. After that I wrote down those missing words in my diary and practiced pronouncing difficult words day by day. (Minh, student interview 4)

However, two other students who identified themselves as 'low-level students' did not engage in reflecting on their own learning needs and task planning. For example, Ngan said, "I have never thought about my English learning or do things such as writing a blog or diary about my study (Ngan, student interview 2). Cuong also admitted, "I don't have any specific plans for my studying. I only think my English score in the high school graduation examination was really low. I got 2 marks out of 10. And all I want is to say more and write more in English at the university" (Cuong, student interview 1).

When being asked about whether students were aware of their own progress while they were completing a task and how they tracked their progress according to their goals, one student said, “when doing online activities, I often consider the number of points I had finished” (Tan, student interview 3).

Another student described clearly how she could do her self-assessment. Thanh (student interview 6) said:

> When I set a learning goal, I will have to try to accomplish that goal and at the same time I assess how much I can accomplish my plan. I often evaluate my goal accomplishment based on my online test scores. Thus, I will adjust my learning goals and plan to improve my learning performance. It is likely that teachers do not actively use online learning components to scaffold and support individual students’ learning strategy.

Thanh’s comment suggests that she was engaged in setting her own learning goals and monitoring her goals completion using the test scores. It also appeared that Thanh did not get support or guidance from her teacher while she undertook self-assessment.

Thanh also emphasized the important role of self-assessment, “it is very important because if I do not assess the level of where I am, it is very difficult for me to achieve my aims”. (Thanh, student interview 6).

The other 5/7 students were aware of self-assessment, but they did not know how to undertake self-assessment. For example, Cuong stated “Sometimes, I only try my best to complete learning tasks and do not really understand about task requirements or assessment criteria” (Cuong, student interview 1).

Cuong’s comment suggests that he did not understand the objectives or the instructions of learning tasks and lacked knowledge about how to assess his own learning.

It appeared that although the students were aware of the importance of self-regulation, their practice of doing it was still very limited due to their lack of self-regulated skills. None of the students mentioned any teachers’ guidance on how they might reflect and self-regulate their learning.

5.3.4 Outcomes

The *Outcomes* of students' learning activity system refer to what students perceived as the end result of studying in a blended learning environment.

Firstly, 4/7 students responded that blended learning offered them opportunities to be better engaged in the learning process. Ha (student interview 5) seemed to be emotionally engaged in studying English via the university LMS because the use of technology transforms learning tasks into more exciting and engaging activities. Ha said:

> I love the inclusion of such features as images, sounds, animation in the online vocabulary parts, which held my interest throughout the courses [English blended courses]. (Ha, student interview 5)

Additionally, Ha mentioned the quality of her engagement was enhanced by studying in a blended environment, saying:

> Blended learning provides me with more opportunities to work together with classmates. Thus, I have built a good relationship and they [classmates] often helped me check my pronunciation and writing…I received much support and learn much from them [classmates]". (Ha, student interview 5)

Another student, Cuong (student interview 1) felt invigorated and supported when he got prompt individual support from his teacher during the blended courses. He said:

> I feel passionate in studying English because of my teacher's readiness to help me with my questions. For example, when I did an online listening exercise last semester, I found that some answers seemed wrong, so I asked for help from the teacher. And my teacher logged into my account on the website [the LMS], did the listening activities and helped me to re-check answers. (Cuong, student interview 1)

These quotes suggest that several students' engagement in blended courses pertained to the nature of the online learning tasks and students' online learning support from teachers.

Secondly, the students indicated that while a blended learning approach helped them to improve their spoken language skills, their writing has not improved greatly. Four of the seven students acknowledged that their

speaking skills were most improved during their English blended courses. Cuong said:

> After finishing the courses [English blended courses], my biggest improvement is that I have been able to speak and improve my speaking skills. However, regarding writing skill, I feel that I have not written correctly. You know…when we speak, we don't need much grammar and they [listeners] still understand the meaning of my sentences, but writing is different. (Cuong, student interview 1)

Similarly, Trinh believed that her English speaking skills were improved when she found an increase in her final oral test score over a period of one year, and she joyfully said in her interview:

> I found that my speaking skills were improved much after the courses [English blended courses] in my first year of degree because the mark of my final speaking test in the second semester is higher than that in the first semester. And in real life situations, I am ready to communicate and can speak English confidently. I don't feel shy anymore, and don't even feel as fear as in the past…In the past I was so fear that I didn't dare to come close to speak English with a foreigner. (Trinh, student interview 7)

It seems that Trinh also developed her confidence in using English in real-life situations as a result of EBCs.

Two other students recognized the advantages of blended courses in improving their listening skills most as they claimed that they had chances to listen and do listening activities as much as they wanted. Minh commented and gave reasons why his listening skills were much improved:

> I think that my listening skills are the most improved. When I first started studying blended courses, my listening skills were very bad. I couldn't complete listening tasks online as I didn't understand questions and how I could answer them [online listening questions], I didn't know how to listen for identifying key words. Now, after two courses [English blended courses], I feel confident when listening… even when listening English online with voices of native speakers that I do not understand every word. But I will be aware that I do not understand some words, and I will have to listen again and again to recognize the emphasis of sentences for understanding those words. (Minh, student interview 4)

It appears that Minh's listening skill was improved mainly because Minh self-regulated his learning and exposed himself to a variety of language input through the LMS.

To summarise, this section presents the findings of the activity system analysis of students' learning activity in EBCs. The analysis uses Activity Theory as a framework to identify, sort patterns and aggregate findings into Activity Theory elements. Students, the *Subjects* of students' English leaning activity system, had different views about the blended learning environment, indicating their relatively recent experience regarding this environment. They perceived that the LMS assisted them to access learning materials and practice their English language skills. They also believed that the blended learning environment helped enhance their engagement in English study due to the use of digital technologies and teachers' prompt support. The student data indicated that the teachers facilitated students' learning by: monitoring their online tasks completion; encouraging students to use external tools outside the LMS for their independent learning; and organizing pair work and group work activities. While the students agreed that self-regulation is a critical factor for their learning, they appeared to have limited self-regulated skills. In terms of *Rules* element, all the students favoured face-to-face speaking tests rather than online or in-class written tests because they believed that those tests were fairer, more reliable and better assessed their English proficiency. Reflecting on teachers' feedback, most students appreciated their teachers providing feedback to their speaking performances. However, many students seemed dissatisfied with the irregular feedback to online learning, the limited quality of feedback to writing activities and technical issues in their courses.

5.4 Chapter summary

Section 5.2 reports the results of the online student survey. The results indicate that the students valued individual learning tools outside of the LMS such as e-dictionary and pronunciation applications. Most of the participants like using digital technologies and prefer using a smartphone when studying English online. The factor analysis extracted five main factors that the students perceived as having influences on their English learning including: *Content and design features*; *Classroom norms*: *Teachers' roles*; *Benefits of blended learning*; and *Challenges of blended learning.* The internal consistency of each of the five

factors was high (>.80), confirming the reliability of the scales. These were also strong interactions between these key factors.

Section 5.3 reports the findings of the student interview data. The findings were organized according to the elements of Activity Theory. The students perceived that the LMS helped them to flexibly access the English language knowledge and practice language skills, thus potentially enhancing their face-to-face learning. The students believed that self-regulation is a critical factor for their academic success, but they seemed to have little knowledge regarding how to be more self-regulatory. The teachers' facilitation of student learning included: using online reports to monitor student online learning completion; enabling students to use external online tools for their self-study; and organizing pair work and group work activities. All the students highly valued the reliability of the oral test and their teachers' oral corrective feedback. The students also highlighted several issues that inhibited their English learning such as: the lack of feedback during their online activities, the limited quality of feedback for writing activities, and technical issues.

The final chapter discusses the findings of this study and draws conclusions, implications and recommendations.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapters Four and Chapter Five reported on the research findings of how programme leaders (PLs), teachers and students in this study perceived and experienced the blended learning approach at the university through the lens of Activity Theory. This chapter presents a discussion of the research and its conclusions together with research limitations, implications, recommendations for further research. Firstly, the chapter discusses the findings in the light of the literature and the Activity Theory Framework to explore important factors about the ways blended learning has been implemented in a Vietnamese university for teaching EFL. Secondly, this chapter draws conclusions from my study and suggests implications and recommendations for enhancing blended learning in my university and other similar higher institutions in Vietnam.

6.1 Discussion

This section is divided into four sub-sections, discussing the separate activity systems of the PLs, the teachers, and the students, followed by an examination of the tensions between these three activity systems. I begin with the PLs' activity system.

6.1.1 Programme Leaders' Activity System

PLs are responsible for, and play a key role in, the design and implementation of English blended courses in the university. Examining their perceptions and practices and mapping them onto the Activity System framework help identify enablers and constraints in designing blended learning. Through this analysis of PL data, three important findings are discussed in depth:

- The driver for PLs' blended design activity was from their positive belief of blended learning as an innovative EFL teaching and learning method.
- The PLs viewed digital technologies (LMS and social media) as physical tools that mediate instructional design approaches.

- The PLs' design activity was influenced by the top-down directives from their institution as well as regulated by their personal understandings of instructional design principles

These three key findings are discussed in the light of the Activity Theory Framework, which helps illuminate the complexity of the PLs' design activity.

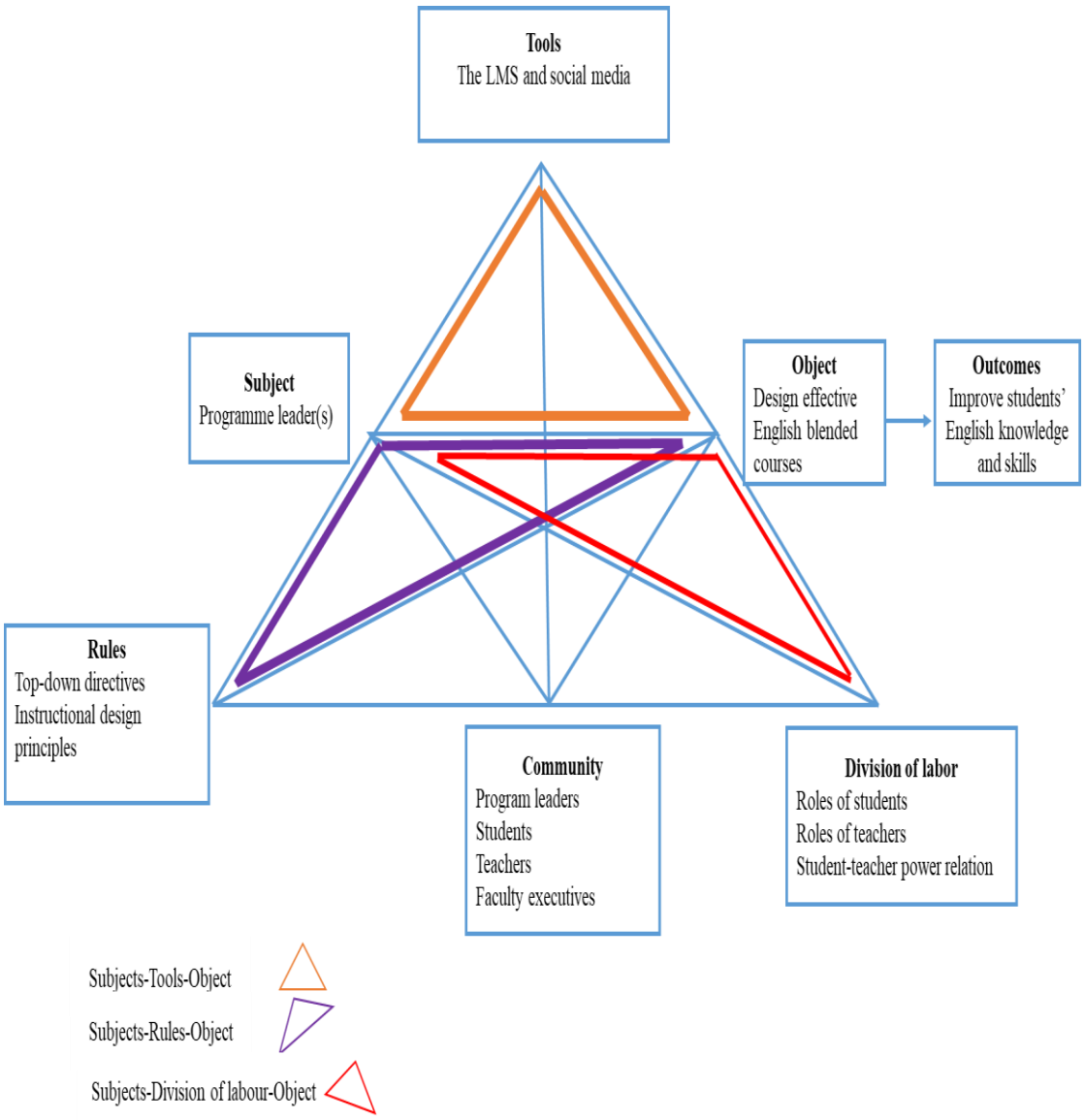


Figure 6.1. The PLs' activity system

In the PLs' activity system (Figure 6.1), the key elements focus on three relationships between components of the PLs' activity system: Subject-Tools-Object; Subject-Rules-Object and Subject-Division of Labour-Object. *Subject*

refers to the three research participant PLs who designed English blended courses (EBCs). *Object* refers to what the PLs aimed to achieve (to design effective EBCs), which were expected to result in *Outcomes* (improvement in students' English knowledge and skills). *Tools* used for the design activity include digital technologies such as the LMS and social media. *Rules* under which the designing activities took place relate to top-down directives from the institution and the PLs' personal understandings of instructional design principles. *Division of Labor* defines the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students.

I start by interpreting the interactions between Subject, Tools and Object, followed by Subject-Rules-Object, and end the section with interactions in Subject-Division of Labour-Object

6.1.1.1 Subject-Tools-Object

The orange triangle in Figure 6.1 represents the interaction between *Subjects* (PLs), *Tools* (the LMS and social media) and *Object* (to design effective EBCs). The findings indicated that the PLs perceived several affordances and constraints with the tools that mediated their designing activities. Particularly, the PLs believed that the affordances of the LMS included assisting the PLs to deliver learning materials and enhancing students' self-paced learning. Programme leader 3, Mai, said that LMS at the university "helps transfer teachers' instructional ideas and offer students rich learning resources". Minh, programme leader 2, thought that the LMS could help to "foster students' independent learning" through being able to redo online activities at any time.

However, the PLs felt that the LMS also constrained the teaching and learning in EBCs. Firstly, the PLs reported a lack of communication tools such as online chats/forums. Given the LMS's instructional design features which mainly focused on drills, practice and online tests, its features were similar to those used in behavioural Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (Warschauer, 1996). Both the LMS in my study, and typical behavioural CALL resources require students to repeat and respond to reinforcement while completing online activities. Strake's (2007) and Bilgin's (2013) studies identified similar

instructional designs, where students are provided with opportunities to practice vocabulary and grammar as well as basic English language skills (listening, reading and writing). However, this LMS model seemed to create learner dependence rather than independence on the knowledge that teachers provided. The LMS does not permit student and teacher communication or interaction and is highly teacher-dominated. One effect was that students had limited opportunities to get involved in the process of generating English language output via the online environment.

Through constructivist approaches, the expectation is that learners produce knowledge by interpreting new information through social interactions (P. Benson, 2001), which is not possible in the current form of the LMS, which appears to limit possibilities for constructivist learning to occur. Perhaps the structure of the current university LMS still reflects the Confucian ideals of teaching, resulting in a focus on both transmitting knowledge and the authority role of teachers. Meanwhile, implementing blended learning via the LMS suggests that high quality blended learning is likely to mean that lecturers will undergo shifts to their pedagogical thinking and practices. This is because in a constructivist context, there is a need to facilitate teacher-student interactions and collaboration in learning. This suggests a need to change the instructional approach related to the LMS. It may be that adapting to a more open and less hierarchical and teacher-dependent educational paradigm within a Confucian-dominated culture will take some time.

Secondly, from the PLs' perspectives, another constraint of the LMS related to technical issues. Consistent with previous findings of Al Bataineh, Banikalef, and Albashtawi (2019), Chew (2009), Comas-Quinn (2011), Mudra (2018), Setyaningsih (2020), and Wright (2017), my findings indicate that "technical problems" (Minh, programme leader 2), such as internet disconnections or low speed, constrained the use of the LMS in EBCs. This finding also resonates with the work of N. T. Hoang (2015), V. G. Ngo (2016), and Vo (2019) in Vietnam, who noted that issues of internet connectivity (unreliable network, slow speed or

disconnection) challenge the use of digital technologies in English language teaching and learning.

In summary, the affordances of the LMS appear to help the PLs and teachers make opportunities for learning available and accessible to students. However, a key constraint of the LMS is the focus on controlled practice (language drills) rather than including interaction. Additionally, technical issues may also have adversely affected the quality of the blended learning experiences for both teachers and students.

6.1.1.2 Subject-Rules-Object

The purple triangle in Figure 6.1 indicates that the relationship between the PLs (*Subject*) and their design of effective EBCs (*Object*) was mediated by the *Rules* (top-down directives and PLs' personal understandings of instructional design principles).

The PLs saw value in what could be achieved using blended learning. For example, Minh, programme leader 2, suggested potential benefits including "improving the education quality" as a result of changing methods of teaching and learning, resonating with Graham (2013) and Garrison and Kanuka (2004). These authors state that blended learning is primarily used in higher education because it has the potential to improve student learning outcomes and satisfaction as a result of pedagogical benefits. Additionally, Hoa (programme leader 1) noted that blended learning "can motivate students to learn and foster independent learning". Hoa's view also reflects findings in earlier studies, which have shown that student motivation can increase within blended learning approaches to English courses (Clavijo Olarte et al., 2008; Gulnaz et al., 2020; Jee & O'Connor, 2014; Sucaromana, 2013). It appears that the PLs' commitment and efforts in designing EBCs was helped by their positive attitudes towards blended learning.

However, the responses from the PLs point to the need for guidelines or a clear shared vision of blended learning and professional development at their institution. Such omissions may relate to blended learning being a relatively new teaching

mode in Vietnam (Bouilheres et al., 2020; N. T. Hoang, 2015). The term 'blended learning' itself is seldom explicitly referred to in Vietnamese government policy documents such as the Higher Education Reform Agenda (Vietnamese Government, 2005), which perhaps points to an underdeveloped understanding of what it entails at many levels of the Vietnamese education system. Because of its newness and the inexperience of members of the education system at various levels, not having guidelines or a vision regarding implementing blended learning may result in poor use of resources, user frustration, and negatively impacting learning outcomes, as argued by Wallace and Young (2010).

The PLs' design activity was influenced by the top-down directives from the institution and was mediated by their personal understanding of instructional design principles. The PLs then worried that they did not have a deep understanding of principles of blended learning approaches during the process of designing the blended courses for teaching English. Their lack of understanding and confusion was, they said, linked to their limited background knowledge and experience of instructional design, coupled with insufficient professional development on such processes. This highlights a need for the institution to provide support and professional development for the PLs regarding blended language course design.

The top-down decision-making process in the PLs' institution is a common practice within Vietnamese public higher education institutions (T. N. Pham & London, 2010). Top-down decision-making possibly inhibits the PLs' efforts at collaboration and making a contribution to improving blended learning implementation, since most PLs were not involved in the decision to shift to blended learning. They felt unprepared in terms of knowledge and skills in being able to design blended language courses.

The PLs each designed a course outline for six consecutive EBCs, for delivery to students of one faculty over six semesters. Thus, to achieve this aim, each of them conducted a needs analysis to identify the content and learning needs which would inform the objectives of EBCs for students of one faculty. For example, Mai (programme leader 3) used the data from the needs analysis phase to decide topics

for the English courses, then generated theme-based online and face-to-face lessons. The needs analysis stage helped the PLs create a mixture of learning activities and resources. Face-to-face instruction usually combines principles of behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism (Ally, 2008). These principles also apply to the design of online learning materials (Ally, 2008, Torrao &Tiirmaa, 2007). However, there was a lack of clear evidence that any of these theories were being engaged with as the PLs designed the EBCs. Thus, it is helpful to help the PLs to understand the principles of different language learning theories to facilitate the blended learning course design.

Overall, the *Rules* (top-down directives and the PLs' understanding of instructional design principles) constrained or mediated the PLs' practice of blended learning design. The lack of opportunities for the PLs to be engaged in the institutional decision-making process may have inhibited the blended course design quality because the PLs felt unprepared and inadequately trained regarding what could be best done to establish high quality blended learning programmes. Moreover, the PLs' own knowledge and experience of instructional design mediated their choices of learning activities. Had PLs been included in decision-making and provided with instructional design professional development, the quality of the EBCs may have been greater.

6.1.1.3 Subject-Division of Labour-Object

The red triangle in Figure 6.1 indicates that the relationship between the PLs (*Subject*) and their EBCs (*Object*) was mediated by the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students (*Division of labour*).

The PLs perceived that the blended learning environment requires both teachers and students to rethink and reshape their roles and take on new responsibilities compared to the roles they may have had in a non-blended learning context. Mai (programme leader 1) noted that "students' active learning role is important in a blended learning environment" while "teachers are not knowledge transmitters anymore". Mai further noted that teachers "have to facilitate students' group work and pair work". However, there was an unbalanced distribution relating to the

roles and responsibilities of teachers and students in EBCs. For example, Minh, one of the PLs, highlighted classroom features which created/reinforced large power distances in the English classroom such as teacher-centred teaching and students' reliance on teachers' instructions. This unbalanced distribution of division of labour may stem from how balances of power are formed in traditional Vietnamese Confucian culture. Teachers are considered the source of knowledge, and often hold much power and decide almost everything relating to students' learning (Le, 2011; C. D. Nguyen, 2017; T. L. Tran, Le, & Nguyen, 2014). Thus, such common views of teacher-student relationships are a challenge for orienting blended learning as a more student-centred approach. Given that blended learning requires students to be more responsible for their own learning (Alebaikan, 2010; Launer, 2010; Van Laer & Elen, 2017), it is necessary to help teachers to shift to student-centred teaching and to guide students to be independent learners.

Overall, the *Division of Labour* emphasized that the teachers should be facilitators and the students should be independent learners in EBCs. However, it seems that the central power of teachers and students' reliance on teachers still existed through the way the LMS is structured in EBCs.

In summary, *Tools* (the LMS), *Rules* (top-down directives and the PLs' personal understanding of instructional design principles) and *Division of Labour* (roles and responsibilities of teachers and students) mediated the design of effective EBCs (*Object*) by the PLs (*Subject*). The PLs' design activity was informed by the top-down directives from the institution and driven by their positive views of blended learning as having potential benefits such as improving the education quality and outcomes. The PLs became involved in the practice of a blended learning design without clear guidelines outlining the purpose, and without any input into choice of LMS and how the LMS could function. They perceived the LMS as a mediational tool that assisted to design and deliver learning materials. However, technical issues (internet disconnections) and certain features of the LMS appeared to constrain the design of effective EBCs. Additionally, the balance of power between teacher and student (teacher-led teaching styles and students' dependence on teachers) influenced the teaching and learning in EBCs.

6.1.2 Teachers' Activity System

At the university in this study, EFL teachers are responsible for delivering EBCs for students across three faculties. According to Borg (2009), teachers' perceptions of pedagogy are reflected in their teaching behaviours and possibly affect student learning outcomes. Hence, understanding EFL teachers' perceptions and practices and mapping them on to the activity system will help identify both inhibiting and contributing factors for the implementation of a blended learning course. There are three prominent findings from the analysis of teacher data, which are:

- Blended learning was not understood as needing a pedagogic change and the teachers were unable to draw on knowledge of instructional design principles for blended learning.
- The LMS and social media were used as mediational *tools*, which influenced the teachers' practice of blended learning.
- Institutional demands regulated the teachers' facilitation of online and face-to-face learning.

These three key findings are discussed in the light of the Activity Theory framework. The detailed description of each element in the teachers' activity system is presented below (see Figure 6.2).

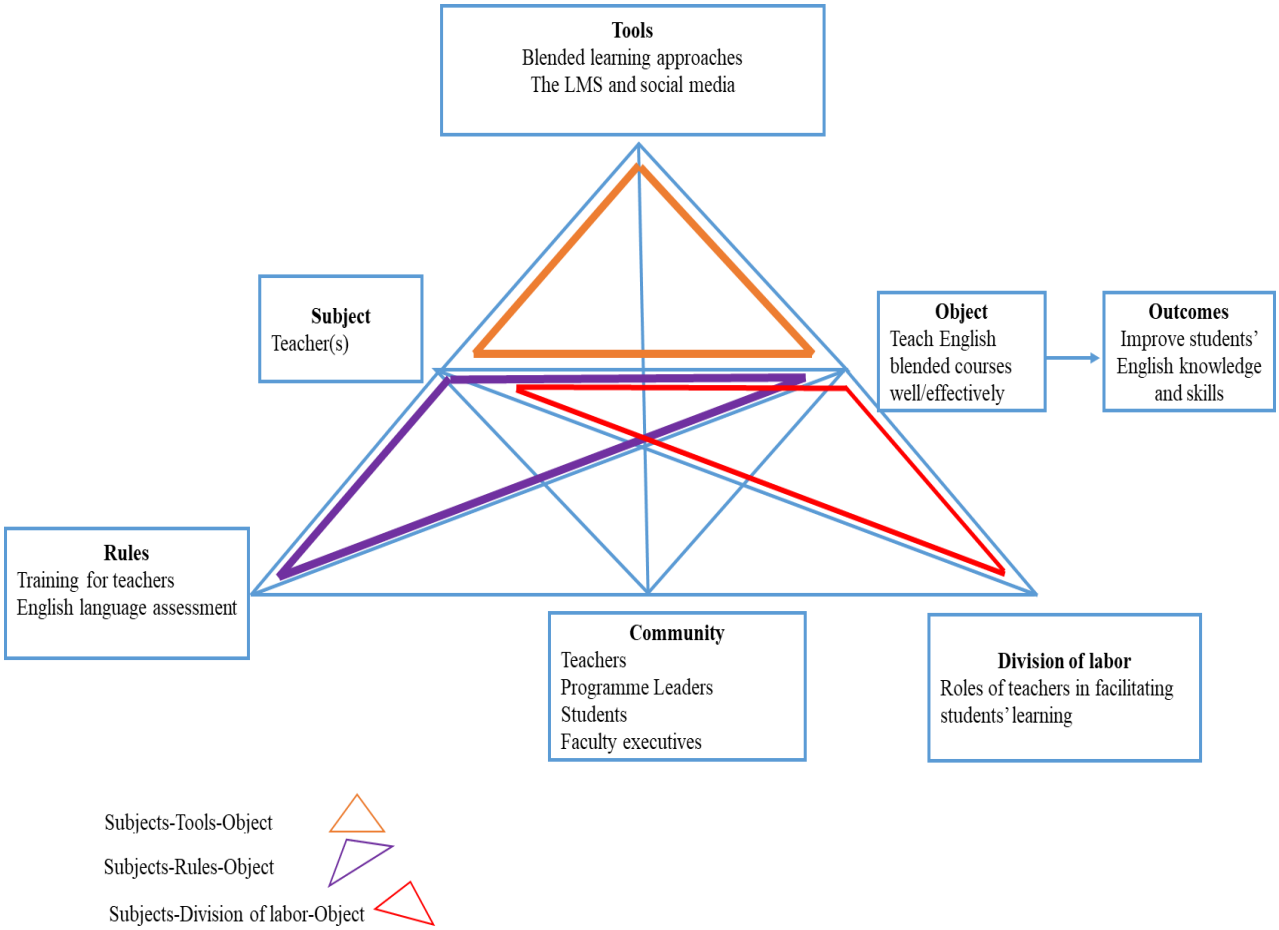


Figure 6.2. The teachers' activity system

With reference to Figure 6.2, in the teachers' activity system, the three key elements for this discussion focus on the relationships between components of the teachers' activity system: Subject-Tools-Object; Subject-Rules-Object and Subject-Division of Labour-Object. *Subject* represents five EFL teachers who participated in teaching EBCs while *Object* relates to what the teachers aimed to achieve (to teach EBCs well/effectively). *Tools* refer to blended learning approaches including the principles of blended learning, and digital technologies such as the LMS and social media. *Rules* that influenced the teachers' teaching activity include the training for teachers to teach in a blended environment and the institutional approaches to English language assessment. *Community* within this activity consists of students, the PLs and faculty executives, while *Division of Labour* concerns the roles and responsibilities of the EFL teachers in EBCs. *Outcomes* refer to the end results of the teachers' activity system, which were both

intended outcomes (students' improvement of English knowledge and skills) and unintended outcomes.

I start by discussing the interactions between Subject, Tools and Object, followed by Subject-Rules-Object, and end the section with interactions in Subject-Division of Labour-Object.

6.1.2.1 Subject-Tools-Object

The orange triangle in Figure 6.2 represents the *Subject* (teachers) achieving their *Object* (teach EBCs well/effectively) by using both psychological *Tools* (their personal understanding of blended learning approaches) and physical *Tools* (the LMS and social media). These *Tools* acted as mediators between the *Subject* and the *Object*, influencing the way teachers implemented learning activities in the blended learning course.

The teachers reported diverse perceptions of the term *blended learning*. Four teachers (n=5) did not see blended learning as being much different from what they had been doing in face-to-face classes. In particular, two teachers viewed blended learning as simply the integration of online and face-to-face learning modes. Their view is similar to what some literature says, that blended learning in language education refers primarily to combining face-to-face classroom and online instruction (Anderson, 2018). A different two teachers (n=5) regarded blended learning as integrating technology in learning. This finding coincides with N. T. Hoang (2015) who found that Vietnamese teachers generally viewed blended learning as using ICT in teaching. Moreover, the teachers expressed divergent views regarding blended learning instructional design. Two teachers thought that online learning was an add-on part to face-to-face lessons. Two others emphasized the more important role of the online components compared to the face-to-face ones. These views contradict to what is emphasized in the literature: that the instructional design of blended learning needs to take account of the strengths and weaknesses of both online and face-to-face modes to create more high quality learning experiences (Stein & Graham, 2020). In short, the teachers' diverse views regarding the blended learning concept and its instructional design

principles indicate a need to develop a clear shared vision and purpose. This would lead to having a guideline for implementing blended learning in their institution which would draw on good EFL blended learning pedagogical practice.

The teachers believed that blended learning could bring benefits to students, teachers and the institution. These blended learning benefits were deemed as the purpose the teachers aimed for (*Object*) while teaching English using blended learning approaches. Firstly, the findings of my study are in accord with recent studies indicating that blended learning can provide students with flexible study (Balci, 2017; N. T. Hoang, 2015; Ju & Mei, 2018; Pardede, 2019), create opportunities for practicing a language (Balci, 2017; Ju & Mei, 2018) and promote students' engagement (Balci, 2017; N. T. Hoang; 2015; Jee & O'Connor, 2014).

Secondly, all five teachers thought that blended learning could help save teaching effort in presenting the content knowledge (English grammar and vocabulary). This was because all the English knowledge was transmitted online in the university LMS for students' self-study purposes. Giang (teacher interview 2) felt that in EBCs, "teachers do not have to spend their time and effort in teaching many things that teachers may find boring like reading skills or grammar in face-to-face classes". Giang's view that teachers would feel happier "when only teaching speaking skills in class", illustrates the views of all five participant teachers. All felt that they were more motivated teaching only speaking practice in face-to-face classes. N. T. Hoang's (2015) study also noted that teachers thought they could save their own time and effort when students studied online. None of the teachers in my study explicitly referred to the pedagogical benefits of blended learning as the potential for altering teachers' role to be facilitators or student-centred learning approaches. Meanwhile, pedagogical benefits of blended learning are often emphasized as amongst its greatest benefits (Graham, 2012; Niemiec & Otte, 2010).

Thirdly, regarding the benefits for the institution, four of the five teachers thought that the blended learning model at their institution could enhance the quality of university students' English oral competence, and promote reputation and

competitive edge of their institution, which is emphasized in the literature (Niemiec & Otte, 2010).

All five teachers reported two affordances of the LMS (a physical tool), seeing it as a mediating and monitoring tool. As a mediational tool, the LMS allowed them to present English language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary), leading to drill and practice exercises for students to undertake by themselves. In terms of monitoring, the teachers used online reports in the LMS to check students' online task completion.

However, the communication tools in the university LMS such as discussion forums or chat rooms, were not enabled. This meant they could not interact with students within the LMS, and therefore sought non-LMS tools to manage interactions. This workaround points to a constraint of the LMS structure potentially adversely affecting teachers' practice of blended language learning, and possibly preventing the teachers from achieving their *Object* (teach EBCs well/effectively) in their activity system.

Because the LMS had no facility for interaction, the teachers found other ways to communicate with students. They used Facebook and Messenger as feedback tools and to enhance students' access to more language input, and to promote students' collaborative learning. These actions made it easier for the teachers to engage with their learners in authentic learning. They thought that it also promoted collaboration, consistent with T. T. L. Nguyen's (2019) Vietnamese study. Since the staff found their own workarounds to facilitate interaction with students, it would seem sensible for the institution to include discussion tools and other tools which help facilitate interaction, learner output and corrective feedback within its LMS.

Another tension/contradiction occurred in the form of issues relating to online learning activities in the LMS. At times there were unclear online learning aims and activities, leading to students' confusion and misunderstandings of expectations. For example, Giang (teacher interview 2) commented that "most students do not know what the objectives of online activities are", most probably

because they were not explicitly communicated to students. Huong (teacher interview 1), for example, believed that her students, especially low-level students, were often confused and did not know how to complete several online learning activities. This lack of clarity needs addressing in future EBCs to minimise student confusion.

Unlike their online lessons, 4/5 teachers did not explain the information about the lesson goals to students regularly or explicitly, even though they acknowledged that the learning objectives of each unit in face-to-face learning materials were highlighted in the face-to-face learning materials. Only one teacher regularly informed students about their lesson goals, checked students' understanding of stated goals and helped students to monitor their progress. This suggests that it is useful for the teachers to understand the purpose and value of learning objectives to help improve students' self-regulated learning.

Reflecting on the outcomes of the adoption of blended learning in English teaching, four of the five teachers perceived that students' speaking skills and students' level of confidence in speaking English were enhanced considerably. The teachers felt that the blended learning benefited students by: creating more opportunities for the practice of the target language and increasing students' engagement in face-to-face speaking. However, some unintended outcomes were also identified. These included students' lower grades in listening and reading skills. The teachers perceived that issues in the design of online listening and reading learning activities might have contributed to these outcomes.

In summary, the teachers' work/teaching practice in EBCs was mediated by both their psychological tools (understanding blended learning approaches) and physical tools (the LMS and social media). The psychological tools, particularly the teachers' understanding of what blended learning is and its instructional design principles, is likely to have influenced their practice of blended learning. Most of the teachers (four out of five) did not view blended learning as requiring a change to pedagogy, and had divergent understandings of the instructional design of a blended course. The teachers thought that the LMS assisted in delivering the course content, managing students' online completion while Facebook enabled

the teachers to communicate with students in a timely manner, for example, by giving feedback; and encouraging collaborative learning. Several tensions occurred due to the lack of communication tools within the current LMS such as discussion forums or chat rooms, and issues relating to online learning activities. However, only the issues of designing online learning activities were deemed to be associated with students' low performance in reading and listening skills, rather than insufficiencies in either LMS design, or teachers' facilitation.

6.1.2.2 Subject-Rules-Object

The purple triangle in Figure 6.2 indicates that the teachers' teaching activity was influenced by the rules (the training for teachers to teach in a blended environment and the institutional approaches to English language assessment).

Firstly, the quality of the professional development for teachers prior to the implementation of the EBCs influenced their teaching activities; however, it mainly consisted of a heavy focus on administrative regulations and teacher compliance (see section 4.3.2.1). It did not, according to the teachers, address pedagogical aspects of blended learning. Teachers were trained to comply with administrative requirements such as preparing teaching profiles, exporting online reports in the LMS and implementing assessment. Literature, however, emphasises the importance of teachers knowing how to establish good blended learning practices (Alebaikan, 2010; V. Benson et al., 2011; Betts, 2014; N. T. Hoang, 2015; Larsen, 2012; Y. Ryan et al., 2013; Vaughan, 2007). The international research points to a need for ongoing, high quality and pedagogically focused professional development and support for teachers from the institution while they practice blended learning.

Secondly, the participant teachers discussed their institution's English assessment framework. It consisted of two main components: a continuous assessment (33%) and a final test (67%). The teachers also reported that the test types included both written and oral forms, conducted either online or in face-to-face settings. All the teachers felt that the in-class paper tests were reliable, but felt that the online tests were less reliable because of concerns about cheating. For example, two teachers

argued that students could get friends to sit their online tests or copy from friends' work. The possibility of students cheating implies that quality assurance processes for online assessments might need review. This also highlights a need to help both PLs and teachers to develop appropriate types of assessment for the online context to robustly assess students' language acquisition and academic performance.

Overall, the teachers' goal of teaching EBCs well/effectively (*Object*) was mediated by the institutional requirements of compliance and summative assessment. The teachers' experience of the training indicated several gaps given its focus on communicating administrative requirements for teaching in a blended learning environment rather than on developing the teachers' practice with blended pedagogies. The university's current language assessment framework, which relies heavily on summative aspects (written and online tests), tended to serve high-stake purposes. Students' potential cheating while doing online unit tests revealed concerns about quality assurance for online assessments in EBCs. This also suggests that it is necessary to reconsider the online assessment design.

6.1.2.3 Subject-Division of Labour-Object

The red triangle in Figure 6.2 indicates the relationship between teachers' roles and responsibilities (*Division of labour*) and their goal of teaching EBCs well/effectively (*Object*). The *Division of labour* element dictated what teachers did in EBCs to facilitate students' English learning.

Broadly, there are a number of similarities between the teachers' practices of blended learning and the practice suggested in the literature for effective blended learning. In the online environment, but outside of the LMS, the main strategies the teachers used to create a supportive online learning environment were encouraging students to contact teachers and classmates via mobile phones and social media and building an online community where students could share difficulties and learning needs. These strategies seem to align with the first two principles for good practice in education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) (see Section 2.3.3.1). Moreover, these strategies accord with the principle that

Vaughan et al. (2013) recommended to build social presence (Garrison, 2011) in an online environment characterised by open communication and trust.

The teachers reported using different strategies to facilitate face-to-face learning such as creating a supportive learning environment, encouraging collaborative learning, providing students with feedback, and developing students' ability to take control of learning. Although these reported strategies seem to align with quality EFL pedagogical principles as synthesized in the literature (see section 2.3.3), the participant teachers appeared to use a limited range of techniques to implement these strategies.

Firstly, three teachers attempted to create a supportive learning environment by setting some classroom norms and building teacher-student and student-student relationships. Their practice reflects one of the strategies for maintaining students' motivation in language classrooms recommended by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013). However, none of the teachers explained how they created an environment to encourage respect and openness, or how they built relationships between themselves and students. These omissions may reflect the prevailing nature of teacher-centric, Confucian pedagogical practices which may no longer be adequate for blended contexts.

Huong (teacher interview 1) noted that she tried to ask her students to share difficulties in the face-to-face class about their online learning difficulties, but some students in her class "never shared anything, always kept silent and did not participate in speaking classes". Perhaps students' silence and non-participation in classroom activities might be a cultural trait related to Confucian values, influencing English language teaching practice in Vietnam at all levels (Le, 2011; T. Q. T. Nguyen, 2013, 2017). Confucianism promotes a hierarchy of respect, and this affects teacher-student relationships. Teachers are highly respected, and students tend to listen and learn knowledge that teachers transmit. Thus, students might be reluctant to be wrong or participate in communicative activities. The power of cultural norms may be an unexplored factor in blended learning in Vietnam.

Secondly, the teachers facilitated students' face-to-face collaborative learning mainly by organizing and monitoring pair-work and group work activities to achieve tasks (see section 4.3.4.2). This practice did not find its way into the online components of learning English because the LMS did not allow for this. Meanwhile, the literature has suggested that teachers can facilitate students' collaborative learning by supporting the progression of practical inquiry in discussion and group activities through triggering events, exploration, and integration to resolution (Vaughan et al., 2013). None of the teachers in this study mentioned the use of such approaches in their work in the EBCs.

Thirdly, consistent with principles for high quality language teaching in the literature (Brandl, 2008; Canale & Swain, 1980; Ellis, 2005), all five teachers admitted that providing students with constructive feedback was important. They also reported that corrective feedback was given mainly in speaking face-to-face classes. Their common practices of giving feedback include: verbal praise, plus errors and corrections. This, however, did not prevent students from repeatedly making the same error. Advice for students in how to make changes going forward might be important to include in feedback (Ellis, 2016). Besides, although all five teachers acknowledged that they asked and instructed the students to give peer-feedback, the teachers still felt that a number of students were not actively involved in this, unless the teachers included rewards or punishments, such as higher or lower grades as extrinsic motivation.

Fourthly, all the participant teachers perceived that it was crucial to develop students' ability to take control of their own learning in a blended environment, to develop self-regulation. To do this, the teachers used two strategies. Four of the five teachers informed students about all of the course objectives and requirements to encourage students to be more self-regulatory. However, there were a number of things they did not monitor regularly: whether students understood the objectives; or if they used the learning objectives to establish learning goals; or whether they regularly reviewed their progress in the target language. The teachers (2/5) also used the *carrot and stick* approach to motivation. For example, Giang (teacher interview 2) used a *stick* - examination failure - as a powerful motivator

to encourage students to establish individual learning goals. But she also applied a *carrot* approach - an emphasis on the benefits of becoming a competent English user - to motivate her students.

Rewards and punishments regarding practice peer-feedback and self-regulation as a motivation approach (using external regulations such as rewards or punishments) potentially leads to negative outcomes such as students not participating in the task or showing negative feelings (Deci & Ryan, 2012). On the other hand, high levels of self-determined motivation (intrinsic motivation) are associated with positive outcomes (long persistence in learning, high levels of effort expended in learning and achievement) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2012). Supporting teachers to develop such practices might be useful for the institution to provide as professional development.

Overall, the *Division of Labour* focused on the roles and responsibilities of teachers in teaching EBCs (*Object*). The teachers used a range of strategies to facilitate online and face-to-face learning. However, their techniques tend to apply teacher-centred pedagogies that appear to align with Confucian values. This traditional teacher-led approach may limit the quality of their blended learning facilitation. More open, student-centred and relational practices appear to be more appropriate for blended language learning contexts.

In summary, *Tools* (teachers' understandings of blended learning approaches, the LMS and social media), *Rules* (the training for teachers and English assessment framework) and *Division of Labour* (roles and responsibilities of teachers) mediated the teaching of EBCs (*Object*) by the teachers (*Subject*). The teachers' practices had been influenced by the professional development they had access to, their teacher education and their compliance with the institution's English assessment methods. Most of the teachers did not view blended learning as a needing a change in pedagogy, and had limited knowledge of instructional design principles for blended learning. The teachers identified the affordances of the LMS as helping them to both deliver content knowledge and manage students' online completion. The teachers also thought that Facebook and Messenger assisted them by providing students with more language input, giving students

feedback and encouraging collaborative learning online. However, the teachers indicated several constraints in relation to the instructional design of the LMS (lack of constructivist interactive features such as online discussion/forum), and online learning activities (not having clear objectives). The teachers also attempted to use a variety of strategies to facilitate students' online and face-to-face learning. These strategies included providing a supportive learning environment; enabling collaborative learning; giving feedback to students; and developing students' self-regulation. However, there have been gaps between what the teachers reported as important strategies and their practices.

6.1.3 Students' Activity System

A total of 339 EFL students across three faculties in a Vietnamese university completed the online survey. The survey explored critical factors related to students' experiences of EBCs. Seven student participants later participated in a follow-up interview to explore in greater depth what contributed to or hindered their English learning.

The following key findings from the analysis of student data are discussed through the lens of Activity Theory:

- Students used smartphones most often to study English online and they valued the usefulness of online learning tools such as e-dictionaries or pronunciation applications

- Five important factors that the students perceived as having influences on their English learning: *Content and design features*; *Teachers' roles*; *Challenges of blended learning*; *Classroom norms* and *Benefits of blended learning*.

- Institutional assessment methods influenced students' English learning.

- Four key online learning challenges arose: technological issues, lack of online feedback, limited writing feedback, and students' self-regulation skills.

The detailed description of each element in the students' activity system is presented below (see Figure 6.3).

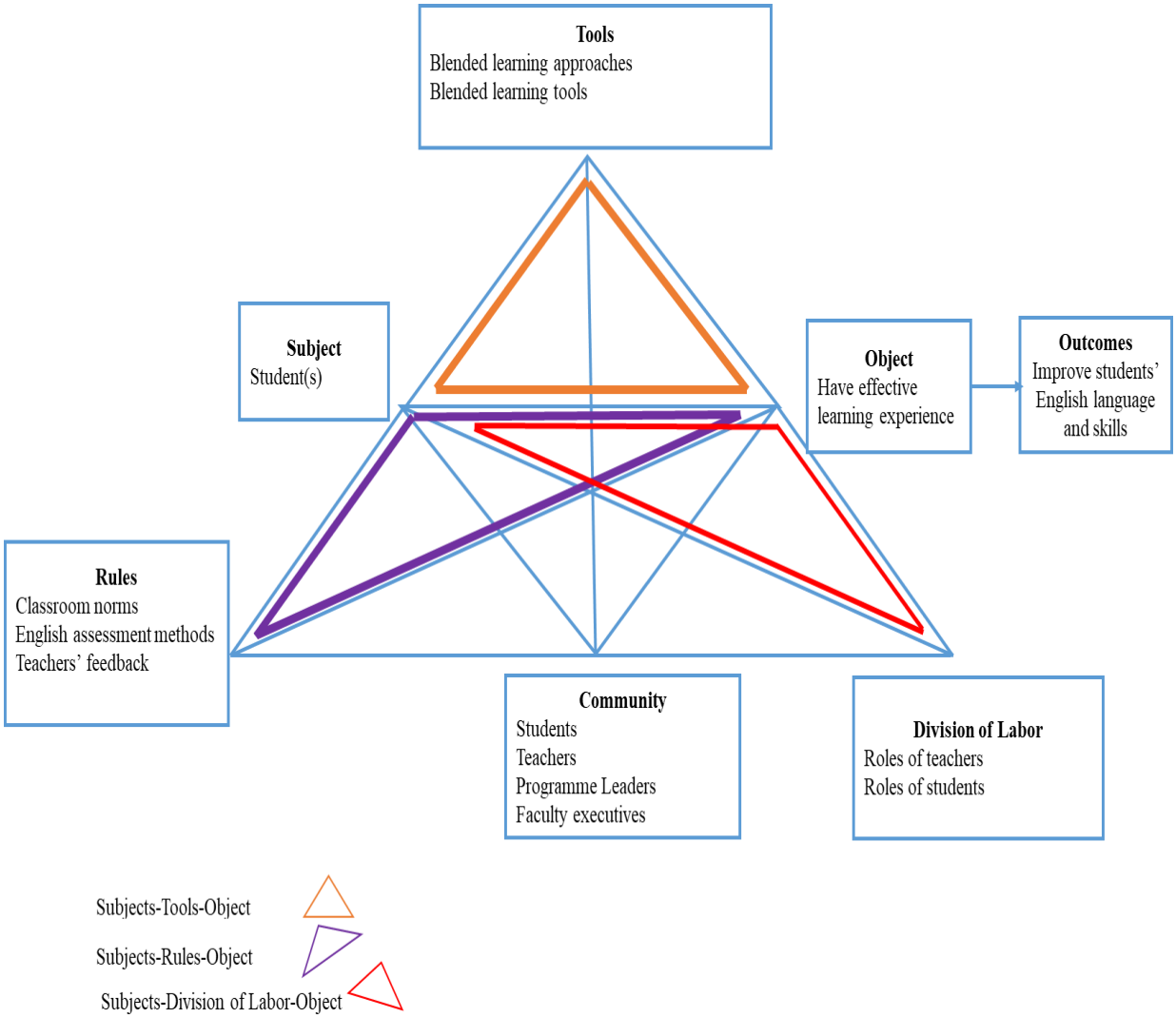


Figure 6.3. The students' activity system

With reference to Figure 6.3, in the students' activity system, the three key elements for this discussion focus on the relationships between components of the students' activity system: Subject-Tools-Object; Subject-Rules-Object and Subject-Division of Labour-Object. *Subject* represents second-year EFL students while *Object* relates to what the students aimed to achieve (to have effective learning experience). *Tools* refers to blended learning approaches, the LMS itself, and external digital tools. *Rules* relate to classroom norms, English language assessment methods, and teachers' feedback that influenced the students' English

learning activity. *Community* of this activity system consists of teachers, the PLs and faculty executives while *Division of Labour* focuses on the roles of students and teachers in EBCs. *Outcomes* refer to the end results of the system, which were both intended outcomes (students' improvement of their knowledge and skills) and unintended outcomes that I have identified through my analysis.

I start by discussing the interactions between Subject, Tools and Object, followed by Subject-Rules-Object, and end the section with interactions in Subject-Division of Labour-Object. It is noted that the quantitative data (online student survey) and qualitative data (student interviews) largely complemented each other, so these data are integrated and discussed as a whole to have a more complete understanding of the complexity of the students' learning activity system.

6.1.3.1 Subject-Tools-Object

The orange triangle in Figure 6.3 represents the *Subject* (students) achieving their *Object* (effective learning experiences) by using physical tools (the LMS and other external tools). These tools acted as mediators between the *Subject* and the *Object* and influenced the way the students learned English in a blended environment.

The *Subject* of the students' activity system represents 339 EFL second-year students. Nearly half of the students have been studying English between 6 to 10 years. The finding reported in Figure 5.1 (section 5.2.1) about students' enjoyment and confidence with digital technologies resonates with Coryell and Chlup (2007) and Hong and Samimy (2010). These studies linked students' experience of computer use to their confidence in using digital technologies for learning. In the Vietnamese university where I conducted my study, the majority of students come from rural and remote areas where they have had few chances to learn with and through digital technologies. Hence, this typical student background probably influences their digital literacy skills and confidence. Both are needed to study in a blended learning environment.

The survey results showed that smartphones (47.4%), and laptops (36 %) ranked among the most popular devices for online English learning. This suggests that

smartphones might be more accessible and easy to use or compatible to the university LMS. Moreover, the survey results (see Figure 5.2, section 5.2.1) indicated that students ranked individual studying tools/behaviouristic tools such as e-dictionaries and pronunciation applications as the most useful tools for their English study compared to interactional tools such as internet forums, blogs or wikis, which may not have been used in their English courses. Given that developing language proficiency through interaction (Ellis, 2005; Long, 1983, 1996; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985) are key features of successful language learning, it seems sensible to encourage students to communicate or interact with other English speakers/peers via communicational tools (online chats/forums, blogs) to produce language output.

The results of exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for the survey data indicated that the students perceived the content and design features of EBCs influenced their blended English learning (see Table 5.4, section 5.2.2). The *content and design features* scale consisted of nine individual items with a mean score of 3.86 (*SD*=0.782). Broadly, the student participants indicated their agreement with every item of that scale (see Table 5.5, section 5.2.2.1). Specifically, the majority of students (>75%) believed that they were advised of the aims of each lesson and felt that both online and face-to-face activities enhanced each other. When further unpacked in student interviews, these findings were generally supported. Four students (n=7) believed that the online activities in the LMS provided them with information and practice in English language knowledge, which helped enhance their face-to-face learning. Students' positive perceptions regarding the complementary nature of the online and face-to-face materials are similar to those in Sagarra and Zapata's (2008) study, but contrast to Stracke's (2007) students' negative perceptions about a lack of integration between online and class content materials.

However, there are several discrepancies between the survey results and the interview findings. Firstly, while nearly 70% of survey students thought that *the content of the English courses was appropriate for delivery in a blended learning environment,* two interviewed students (n=7) complained about the overload of

grammar knowledge and online practices presented in the LMS. It is unclear if this finding points to the limitation of the survey, or small interview student samples, or applies only to online learning. Whichever, the content knowledge was appropriate, but the quantity of knowledge and practice was too great.

Secondly, the survey results suggest that most students (69.9%) believed that the online activities were well-sequenced or well-organized (see Table 5.5, section 5.2.2.1). However, there are also tensions. The first tension was related to online reading materials, which some students struggled with, because of their length and being on screen. Some students did not understand how the reading task would improve their reading proficiency, which may link to a lack of explicit teaching about connections between learning aims and activities and tasks. As Bangert (2008) suggested, it is important to create a good online language teaching practice, such as quality online experiences or, as T. T. Anderson et al. (2001) argued, scaffold students' learning experiences through direct instruction.

Another tension was concerned with online writing activities used in the EBCs. Students disliked the automated features of those online practices because they required strict use of specific punctuation or capitalization in answers. Such online writing drills are similar to features of behaviouristic CALL, which consisted of "basic interactions and decontextualized exercises between the learner and computer, with minimal and unsophisticated automatic feedback given to the learner by the machine" (Hockly, 2016, p. 17). Moreover, four students (n=7) complained about technical issues they faced while doing online learning activities and online unit tests in the LMS, demotivating them. The technical issues included slow or unreliable internet connections. The problem of poor technological infrastructure such as slow internet connection has been frequently reflected in other EFL contexts such as Jordan and Indonesia (Al Bataineh et al., 2019; Mudra, 2018).

The results of EFA also indicated that the students perceived *Benefits of blended learning* as a key factor affecting their English learning (see Table 5.8, section 5.2.2.4). More than half of the students believed that blended learning enhanced their motivation, engagement, and satisfaction in EBCs, consistent with previous

studies (Clavijo Olarte et.al., 2008; Gulnaz et.al., 2020; Jee & O'Connor, 2014; Sucaromana, 2013). However, when I asked students about the benefits of blended learning, the students did not mention motivation or satisfaction, they strongly focused on engagement. Four out of the seven interview students responded that blended learning offered them opportunities to be better engaged in the learning process. For example, Ha (student interview 5) seemed to be emotionally engaged in studying English on the LMS because the online aspects transformed learning tasks into more exciting and engaging activities. Ha (student interview 5) noted "I loved the inclusion of such features as images, sounds, animation in the online vocabulary parts, which held my interest throughout the courses".

In short, students' learning experiences (*Object*) were influenced by the physical tools (the LMS and other tools outside of the LMS) used for their English learning. The students thought that the LMS helped enhance their face-to-face learning by providing them the English language knowledge and language skill practices. However, students raised a number of issues relating to how the online reading and writing tasks had been designed in the online environment, the automated behaviouristic characteristics of the LMS, the overload of knowledge delivered in the LMS, and the technical issues. These tensions challenged students' learning activities and affected their learning experience.

6.1.3.2 Subject-Rules-Object

The purple triangle in Figure 6.2 indicates that the students' learning activity was influenced by the rules (classroom norms, summative tests and teachers' feedback).

Firstly, the EFA results indicated several *Classroom norms,* which affected how students worked individually or in groups in their EBCs. Overall, student ratings (see table 5.6, section 5.2.2.2) showed students' uncertain views of statements (neither agreed or disagreed) about their interaction and collaboration with teachers and other students. Perhaps this shows how varied their experiences of the EBCs were. For example, roughly 40% of students did not notice if teachers guided them to undertake self-evaluation. This finding is also reflected in the

interviews. Only two (n=7) students said that they were engaged in self-assessment. Thanh (student interview 6) said she set herself a learning goal and tried to achieve it, often evaluating her goal accomplishment using test scores. Thanh did not receive any support or guidance from her teacher during her self-evaluation process. Moreover, other students (5/7) did not know how to undertake self-evaluation even though they had been made aware of its importance. Lack of teachers' guidance in undertaking self-assessment appears to influence the development of students' self-regulation skills which play a key role in a blended environment (Barnard et.al, 2009; Setyaningsih, 2020; Van Laer & Elen, 2017). This also means that the teachers may have not adequately facilitated students' learning, nor offered enough encouragement to students to engage in their learning process (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) or develop autonomous learning (Marsh, 2012).

Secondly, all seven interviewed students agreed that the in-class written tests and oral tests better assessed their learning performance rather than the online test format. Like the teachers, they thought the opportunity to cheat was too great online. This implies that it is necessary for the institution to review the current online assessment method.

Next, the students commented on the quantity and the quality of feedback they received in their EBCs (see section 5.3.2.2). Five (n=7) interviewed students highly appreciated teachers' corrective feedback to students' face-to-face speaking performances. Students used words like "encouraging" and "supportive". Such feedback could be interpreted as *constructive*. The practice of giving constructive feedback on student performance reflected one key principle for good language teaching practice as suggested by Brandl (2008), Canale and Swain (1980), Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Ellis (2005). Such high-quality feedback was not, however, consistent across teachers or courses. The quantity and the quality of feedback for online activities was an issue for students. Their experiences were variable and broadly negative. It seemed that the teacher's presence in the online environment of EBCs was very limited. This is, perhaps, due to the limitation of the LMS mode where the communicative functions were

not activated, and the teachers had no opportunities for commenting online about students' online learning.

If we accept that a teacher's role is to provide scaffolds that assist learners to construct meaning in their knowledge construction process (Way & Rowe, 2008), it was apparent that the teachers were not greatly involved in facilitating students' online learning process since they were unable to use any interactive features such as chat rooms or discussion forums within the LMS.

Student views extended to the type and quality of teacher feedback for writing activities. Two (n=7) students were dissatisfied with the feedback they received for writing activities. There was a lack of clarity in assessment criteria, or feedback did not suggest what was needed to improve the writing. Given that constructive feedback (Brandl, 2008; Ellis, 2005) is crucial for effective language learning, professional development regarding constructive feedback provision especially in an online context, would benefit all concerned.

Overall, the students' learning experiences (*Object*) were regulated by the *Rules* including the classroom norms, institutional assessment framework (such as summative tests and teachers' feedback). The students' perceptions and experiences of the *Rules* indicated several tensions relating to the reliability of the online test type for high-stake purposes, the lack of feedback for online activities and the poor feedback for writing activities. These tensions highlighted a need to seek ways to upgrade and modify the LMS design, particularly to take account of the key principles for good language teaching practice, reconsider the online assessment design and provide training for teachers regarding feedback provision.

6.1.3.3 Subject-Division of Labour-Object

The red triangle in Figure 6.3 indicates the relationship between the roles of students and teachers (*Division of labour*) and students' effective learning experience (*Object*). The *Division of Labour* element defines what teachers and students did in EBCs to help students to achieve an effective learning experience.

The EFA results of the online survey indicated that the students viewed *Teachers' roles* as an important factor affecting their English learning. The students generally held positive views of teachers' teaching practices and behaviours in EBCs because of high ratings for every item in *Teachers' roles* scale (see Table 5.7, section 5.2.2.3), consistent with Larsen (2012). However, these findings were not replicated in the interview findings because the student data indicated a lack of teachers' online feedback and support. The contradictions between the survey results and the interview findings imply that the survey questions may limit what students might answer compared to the interviews. Another possible explanation for these contradictions might be due to Vietnamese cultural values. Perhaps, most students may not feel comfortable saying negative things about their teachers even when their questionnaire responses are anonymous.

From the students' experiences, the teachers facilitated their learning in EBCs by: monitoring their online task completion using the online reports in the LMS; organizing group-work activities (group presentation or problem-solving activities) and games in face-to-face speaking lessons (see section 5.3.3.1). For example, Minh's teacher often grouped students of different levels together and asked them to co-work to complete a shared task. Minh (student interview 4) commented "a high-level student will be the leader in the group and give feedback to the other people in the group in terms of pronunciation, grammar structures and vocabulary". Mixed ability pair and group work activities in this case relied on more able students assuming the role of teacher in giving feedback. This finding indicates that the students are getting the free practice in their groups, an important aspect in language output practice and development. Moreover, Minh's comment also reveals his teacher' preference to give feedback on grammar and pronunciation (linguistic forms), neglecting the opportunity to give feedback on sociolinguistic and pragmatic uses of language. Since the literature has suggested that high quality language teaching should focus on both form and meaning (Ellis, 2005, 2016), teachers also need to draw students' attention to negotiation of meaning.

The interview findings showed that the students generally believed that self-regulation was an important factor for academic success in a blended learning environment, consistent with Alebaikan and Troudi (2010), Barnard et al. (2009), Setyaningsih (2020), and Van Laer and Elen (2017). However, the EFA results revealed students' perceived *Challenges of blended learning* (see Table 5.9, section 5.2.2.5), in which more than a third of the survey participating students felt that they faced difficulties managing their time in EBCs. Additionally, only two interviewed students (n=7) stated that they were engaged in goal-planning, while others were not. Literature has suggested a range of self-regulation skills that students need to successfully participate in blended courses including: organization, discipline, time management, and self-efficacy to manage their own learning processes (McDonald, 2014). On that basis, the students' self-regulation skills in this study appear to be limited, or under-utilised. This apparent lack of self-regulation among the participants in my study could be as a result of the teacher-dominant teaching style in Vietnam (Le, 2011).

Given that recent research in the Vietnamese context consistently shows that students are very much dependent learners (L. H. N. Tran et al., 2018; T. L. Tran et al., 2014; Trinh et al., 2019), this characteristic potentially challenges the facilitation of blended courses. Moreover, Alebaikan (2010) and Tosun (2015) suggested that teachers may have a significant role in supporting students to develop their self-regulated skills in blended learning environments. Thus, it is necessary to instil in teachers the need to motivate and guide students to develop their self-regulated learning behaviours to better success in blended learning contexts.

In short, the *Division of Labour* described what the teachers and the students did in their EBCs to help students to have effective learning experience (*Object*). While the online survey results indicated that most students held positive perceptions of teachers' facilitation in EBCs, the interview findings did not fully reflect the survey results. By contrast, the interview findings highlighted inadequate facilitation from teachers. Moreover, although the students believed that self-regulation is a key factor for their learning success, they appeared to have

limited self-regulated skills. This suggests a need to support students to develop their ability to monitor/ assess /regulate/ control their own learning, and the teachers/the PLs need to play a role in this.

In summary, *Tools* (the LMS), *Rules* (classroom norms, summative tests and teachers' feedback) and *Divisions of Labour* (roles of teachers and students) influenced students' effective language learning experience (*Object*). The students identified the positive affordances of the LMS as helping them to flexibly access the English language knowledge and practice language skills, and recognised how blended learning enhanced their face-to-face learning and overall engagement. The students held contrasting views regarding teachers' facilitation in EBCs. On the one hand, the survey data indicated the students' positive views in terms of teachers' facilitation in EBCs. On the other hand, the interview data reported a lack of teachers' support and poor facilitation particularly given the nature of language teaching and learning. The students also acknowledged that self-regulation is essential for their learning success, but they appeared to have limited skills to implement it due to the influence of the teacher-dominant teaching style. Moreover, the students faced some challenges while studying EBCs such as the lack of constructive and corrective feedback for online activities, the limited quality of feedback for writing activities, and technical issues, potentially affecting their learning experience.

6.1.4 Contradictions/Tensions between three activity systems

An activity system is not static, and may be constantly changing through the adoption of new objects, being subjected to new rules, or using new tools and technology. Thus, in any activity system, contradictions or structural tensions are considered as a source of change and development (Engeström, 2001).

In the previous sections. I have discussed tensions within the activity systems of the PLs, the teachers, and the students. Now, in this section, I discuss tensions between three interacting activity systems, known as the third generation of Activity Theory (Engestrom, 2001).

The elements of one activity can never be separated from other activities because they interact with and are influenced by neighbouring activities within the system. In my study, tensions emerged in the interactions between the central/main activity (students' English learning) and two neighbouring activities (see Figure 6.4), teaching activity and designing activity, and these activities occurred within the broader activity, the English blended learning program.

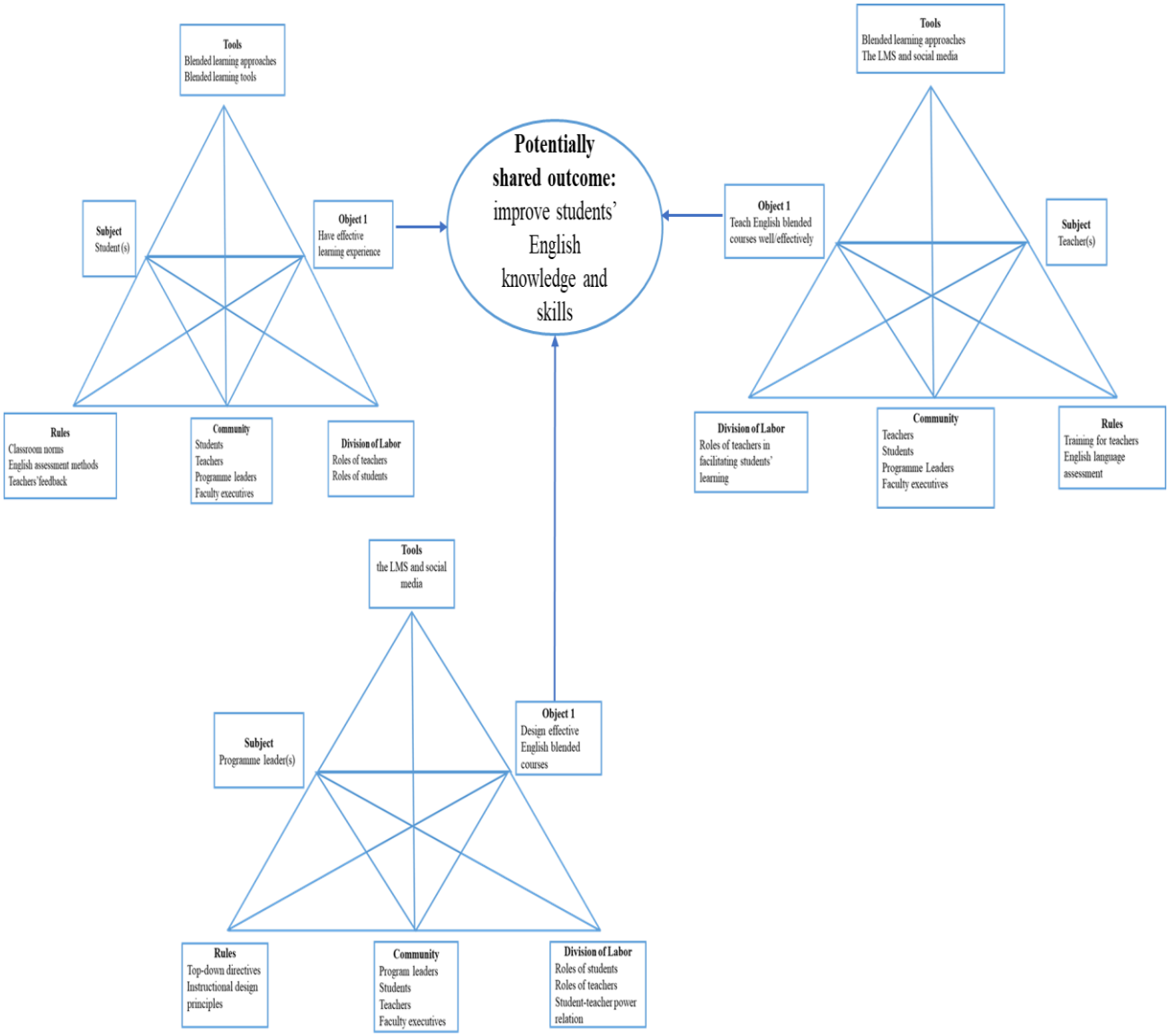


Figure 6.4. The interactions between the central activity and neighbouring activities

The English learning activity, the teaching activity and the course design activity were interrelated because these activities were aimed at the potential shared and expected outcome, *to improve students' English knowledge and skills* (see figure 6.4). The central activity (students' English learning) was influenced by both the design and teaching activity.

Several tensions have been identified in this expansive leaning system. Firstly, a tension could exist due to the power relations that occur at the interface of PLs, teacher and student activity systems. By this I mean the unequal participation between the three perspectives (student perspective, teacher perspective or PL perspective). The PLs or teachers could exert their powers over the students' perspective (deciding what students had to study) regardless of the students' expectations, experience and skills. The PLs or the teachers were able to set performance outcomes for students throughout their learning activities in EBCs, while the students themselves probably felt such outcomes were unrealistic due to their limited experience and skills of blended learning (such as limited digital proficiency and self-regulated skills). The PLs reported that roughly 45% or 50% students in a class could achieve the stated course objectives (see section 4.2.5). Thus, the tension due to the power relations could explain the low proportion of students who could achieve the stated course objectives. Moreover, such tension is likely to reflect the effect of hierarchical principles and large power distance, often seen in Confucian context (Hofstede et al., 2010). This implies that several cultural values in Confucianism appeared to hinder students' voice and their active participation in deciding and control their learning. Meanwhile, learning in a blended context requires students to be highly autonomous.

Second, students' effective learning experiences (the *Object* of students' learning activity) were not achieved, and were possibly not being transformed into *outcomes* (students' improvement in English language and skills) because the concurrent activities of online and face-to-face teaching were not adequately facilitated in such a way as to take account of language teaching and learning principles. Very little support/facilitation from the teachers was given to the students in the online learning process, demonstrated through the students'

reported limited interaction and lack of feedback on their online learning. The possible explanation for this was that the university LMS did not incorporate online/discussion tools. This points out the technical limitation of the LMS and the instructional design approach to EBCs. In addition, if we accept that language learning happens best when there are interactions with others (teachers, peers or native speakers) (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007), what appears to have been missing for these students is opportunities for online interaction with teachers and peers. Thus, teachers' facilitation/assistance, especially in the online learning environment, would have been necessary to scaffold students' knowledge, and to encourage students to move beyond their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978).

In short, the tensions in the interactions between the central activity (students' English learning) and two neighbouring activities (PLs' design activity and teachers' teaching activity) hindered students from achieving effective learning experiences, which may then have impacted on their English language learning outcomes.

6.2 Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that influence the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning approach at a university in Vietnam. My motivation in doing this study arose from my experience of the shift from the traditional face-to-face English teaching to the blended teaching at this university. I faced several challenges in accommodating myself with this new teaching method. I observed that my students had faced challenges while they studied in a blended learning environment as well. While blended learning has been well researched in a number of developed countries, only a few studies have addressed this in Vietnam, a developing country, especially in EFL contexts. Thus, I was interested in exploring different educational stakeholders' perspectives regarding blended learning for EFL. Accordingly, from these stakeholders' perspectives, I could identify factors contributing to or hindering the teaching and learning in a blended environment. These are addressed as responses to my research questions below:

What are Vietnamese programme leaders' perceptions and practices of a blended learning design?

My study indicates that the PLs' design activity was influenced by top-down directives from the institution and the nature of the LMS. They appeared to have designed a blended course without clear guidelines regarding how to do it from the institution, and appear to have been not aware of how best to design a blended learning course that addressed the key principles of language teaching and learning. They viewed the LMS as a mediational tool that helped to deliver learning materials. From the PLs' perspective, tensions due to technical issues, informational/automated features of the current LMS structure, and the balance of power between the teachers and students, influenced the teaching and learning in a blended learning environment. These findings raise several implications to institutions who wish to introduce the blended learning programme:

- Institutions need to be aware of the fit of their blended learning programme with their intended educational outcomes, and ways of teaching that may best fit the discipline, in this case, English.
- Institutions need to be aware of the fit of institutional regulations/demands with pedagogies of blended environments, and of the discipline.
- Institutions need to be aware of the fit of technological infrastructure and the development of blended learning programme for a particular subject area.

What are Vietnamese teachers' perceptions and practices of a blended learning approach?

My study shows that the teachers did not feel they needed to change their pedagogical approach in order to teach English in blended learning environments. This might be a consequence of having limited knowledge of blended learning instructional design principles. The teachers used the LMS to deliver the English language knowledge and manage students' online completion. Meanwhile, the social media tools adopted outside of the LMS and with the teachers' own choosing helped the teachers to provide students with more language input, to give

feedback and to encourage collaborative learning online. The teachers' teaching practices were influenced by the administrative professional development they received around blended learning. They attempted to use a variety of strategies to facilitate students' learning. However, the techniques they used to implement these strategies appeared to be limited, indicating their little understanding of student-centred pedagogy. This is perhaps due to the lack of professional development on language blended pedagogies, which is needed to help teachers to facilitate blended language learning. These findings imply several key considerations:

- Institutions should be aware of and recognize the important roles of teachers in the blended learning programme.
- Institutions should be aware of their roles in providing teachers with ongoing training and support to shift to student-centred pedagogy in blended contexts.

What are Vietnamese learners' perceptions and experiences of a blended learning approach?

My study indicates that the students preferred using smartphones to study English online and found some online tools such as e-dictionary or pronunciation software highly useful for their individual learning. They used the LMS to access the course materials and practice language skills. However, their blended learning experience was constrained by technical issues; limitations regarding instructional design approach to LMS (lack of interactive features); teachers' inadequate facilitation and a lack of self-regulated learning skills. These findings suggest a number of implications for higher education institutions:

- Institutions should explore and understand students' knowledge, experience and skills if they wish to implement blended learning.
- Institutions should be aware that the instructional design approach to the LMS (which based on understandings of language teaching and learning theories and pedagogical principles) and blended learning tools may hinder or enable students' blended language learning experience.

- Institution should be mindful of technical issues and ways to eliminate these issues.

What factors contribute to affecting the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning approach?

The answer for this question was synthesised/drawn from the interpretation of the findings of the first three research questions. Factors contributing to or hindering the teaching and learning English in a blended learning approach are related to the institution, the teachers and the students.

Firstly, the institution-related factors include:

- The LMS structure/the instructional design of the LMS chosen by the institution affected PLs', teachers' and students' practice of blended language learning.
- Lack of clear institutional guidelines and pedagogical training hindered designing and teaching activities in a blended learning approach.
- Institutional regulations regarding assessment and administrative demands possibly constrained teachers' facilitation of students' learning.
- Technological issues due to poor infrastructure also constrained the teaching and learning in a blended environment.

Secondly, the teacher-related factors include:

- Teachers' inadequate understanding of blended learning approaches (instructional design principles, student-centred pedagogy, need to develop students' self-regulation skills) affected their roles change in blended learning environments.
- Teachers' inadequate facilitation of both online and face-to-face learning affected students' learning experience.

Thirdly, the student-related factors include:

- Student's digital experience and proficiency were linked to their positive learning experience.
- Students' lack of self-regulated skills hindered their learning in a blended learning environment.

All these factors within a university are interrelated and influence each other. For example, if the LMS design had limitations, it would negatively affect both teachers and students' practice of blended learning. If teachers did not or could not facilitate students' online learning (due to the lack of communication tools within the LMS or their lack of knowledge regarding facilitating skills), students' online learning experience would be negatively affected. This appears to have impacted on good pedagogical language practice, which may affect effective English language acquisition. Moreover, students' self-regulated skills might be enhanced with the support and facilitation from their teachers.

6.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, there is a limitation related to the use of the self-report questionnaire. Self-report questionnaires are based on participants' perception of the phenomenon under investigation, (i.e., English blended courses). Thus, the students in this study might not respond accurately since they might not remember all their past experiences of English blended courses. They might also have answered the questions in a way that they believed was socially and culturally acceptable and safe, especially when they were asked to evaluate their teachers' practice and behaviours.

Secondly, my research was confined to the context of EFL blended learning in Vietnam. Interview data were collected from small samples of PLs (three), teachers (five) and students (seven) in a university context, and may not be generalisable to other PLs, teachers or students in other contexts.

Thirdly, the next limitation relates to the use of translated online survey scales and translation of the individual interview data. I transcribed and then translated the data on my own, so researcher bias might affect the translation process. I also attempted to follow the rigorous step during the translation process and be as faithful to the interview participants' original words as possible. However, it is likely that due to the cultural differences, the translated versions may not have fully captured the abstract and nuanced meanings in the original versions. This, perhaps, may affect my interpretation of the data.

Next, there is a limitation related to the methodology. This study has focused on EFL teachers' and students' practice of blended learning, and I mainly used self-reported data. Meanwhile classroom observations may help the researcher to understand what is happening in the classroom although being interpreted by the researcher. However, I recognized that there were cultural considerations around using observation in my study. Firstly, observation is not a commonly cultural practice in Vietnam while it has been commonly used language-related research in other countries. Secondly, because blended learning is relatively new in my institution, I felt that the pressure of being observed may not be taken well by teachers. Furthermore, using observation was also beyond the scope of my PhD.

Finally, I am mindful that since I worked as an insider researcher, my analysis and interpretation may have been influenced by my personal bias due to my background knowledge, and familiarity with the participants, the LMS and the research site. However, I believe that my acknowledgement and openness about this can minimize the possible impacts of my personal bias.

6.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be drawn for the policy makers at the national and the institutional level, for EFL programme leaders and teachers regarding the practice of blended language learning.

Recommendations for ICT integration policy in Vietnam

Blended learning has been considered a new trend in Vietnam in recent years. The Vietnamese government has focused on the integration of ICT in education including the adoption of e-learning or blended learning. However, little attention has been given to the term *blended learning* regarding what it really meant or identifying its objectives and principles. Thus, I suggest that the government policy documents should include a clear guideline and framework regarding defining blended learning, its purposes and how to implement blended learning at various levels of education in Vietnam. Furthermore, the government would need to provide sufficient training, resources as well as technical infrastructure for implementing blended learning

Recommendations for higher education institutions

At the institutional level, the findings indicate that the introduction of blended learning was believed to have the potential to enhance the quality of English language teaching as a result of the change in teaching methods. Thus, there are a number of points that could be addressed to establish high quality implementation of EFL blended learning:

- Institutional policy regarding the implementation of blended learning (such as institutional objectives, scale processes, support plan, and training) should be clearly communicated to all stakeholders (programme leaders, teachers and other support staff such as IT technicians, administrators and coordinators). It is also important that the decision making process should engage with and consider perspectives of different stakeholders especially teachers and students.

- ICT facilities in the institution need to be invested in and upgraded such as the internet connection and speed, servers, and Internet-connected computers so that teachers and students can easily and flexibly access to the LMS at the campus. In particular for EFL, the university LMS needs to incorporate the interactive and communication tools such as online

chat/discussion forum to afford teachers-student interaction throughout the English blended courses.

- It is necessary to provide professional pedagogical development, ongoing training and support for the PLs, teachers before and while they practice blended learning. The professional development for the PLs and teachers should equip them with Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge plus blended course design principles, and other skills such as feedback skills and online discussion facilitation skills. Moreover, training and ongoing support need to be provided to students, especially those who lack the required skills to study in a blended environment.

- It is also helpful to rethink/reconsider the design of online assessment to ensure the reliability of this type of assessment; or the LMS needs to be accommodated to make sure students are taking the online tests honestly.

- Some institutional administrative requirements should be reviewed such as using online reports to control students' compliance to online learning. Rather, strategies to engage and keep students engaged in online learning should be considered.

- Finally, ongoing and regular evaluation that investigates teachers' and students' perceptions and experiences of blended learning needs to be conducted to help redesign/improve the blended learning programmes.

Recommendations for EFL programme leaders

My research identified perceptions and practice of a blended learning design of EFL programme leaders. The research revealed that they had limited knowledge and experience in designing a blended learning course. Therefore, it is useful for the PLs to increase their professional knowledge about:

- Instructional design principles in a blended learning environment and that takes into consideration language teaching and learning principles.

- Consultation processes with teachers and students about what works in order to redesign the courses

- Developing stronger understanding of different second language learning theories to facilitate appropriate matches between learners, content and instructional design strategies, particularly in a blended learning context.

- Selecting appropriate instructional strategies from a range of language learning theories (Behaviourism, Cognitivism or Constructivism) to see how and what works best as teaching shifts into a blended learning context.

Recommendations for EFL teachers

My research revealed that teachers' facilitation in a blended learning environment was inadequate, thus negatively affecting students' language learning experience. Therefore, teachers can enhance their facilitation of students' learning by:

- Understanding students' perceptions and experiences regarding blended learning to better address their language learning needs.

- Understanding and being able to apply student-centred pedagogy to develop students' active and collaborative learning and use of the target language in communication.

- Guiding, monitoring and supporting students to develop their autonomous learning and self-regulated skills.

- Creating a supportive online community to build up social presence and connect with students.

- Providing students with prompt and constructive feedback.

6.5 Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of my study have indicated the need for continued research in several areas.

This study has focused on EFL teachers' and students' practice of blended learning, using mainly self-reported data. Given the limited use of observation in Vietnamese research discussed above, this situation should be changed in future research. Thus, my suggestion for further study is to focus on the actual teaching or learning practices of blended learning using classroom observations and/or examining the content of online discussions to explore teachers' and students' practice of blended learning.

This study also noted that teachers' facilitation of students' online learning affected students' face-to-face language learning. Further research focusing on teacher-student interactions in the online environment would be useful to help enhance teachers' facilitation of student learning in blended environments.

This study also highlighted Vietnamese EFL students' limited self-regulated learning skills due to the influence of the teacher-centred pedagogy, potentially affecting their learning in a blended environment. This may have the potential for other researchers to examine this area in other Vietnamese contexts, such as focusing on how blended learning may help students to develop their self-regulated learning skills or the teacher's role in helping students to develop those skills or the impact of self-regulated skills on blended language learning outcomes.

This study is an Activity Theory analysis of mediational factors that affected the teaching and learning English in a blended mode, focusing on meso-level analysis of the phenomenon. Further research could build on a micro-level analysis of the phenomenon, for example, using an Activity Theory framework to explore teachers' practice of giving feedback in blended courses or students' engagement in online discussion.

Blended learning has also been implemented in other Vietnamese EFL contexts. As such, another area involves the need for further studies in other settings in Vietnam such as secondary schools to continue to build a rich description of how EFL programme leaders, teachers and students perceived and practice blended learning.

6.6 Concluding personal remarks

Studying for a PhD has enhanced my intellectual and professional knowledge, which I strongly believe will help me in my future career as an English instructor or as a researcher. Prior to embarking on my PhD project in 2016 in New Zealand, I had taught English for nearly 10 years in a range of levels from primary to tertiary in Vietnam. It was not until I was exposed to different kinds of thinking and practices that I realised I am strongly influenced by Confucian beliefs and values. They are unconscious values that I now see differently. A common feature of Confucian thought is to respect and defer to teachers. I too behaved this way, rather than asking questions or critiquing ideas. I treated my teachers with high respect, believing their knowledge and learning was superior to my own. I also often acted and behaved following the hierarchical principles and social rules in the university, which sometimes hindered my critical thinking and creativity. I normally applied a knowledge transmission approach to teaching and even exerted my power on students and tried to control my students' learning activities by practising strong institutional regulations regarding testing and examination. When ICT was encouraged to use in my institution and blended learning was adopted to teach English, I knew very little about ICT in education, blended learning concepts, instructional design, and pedagogical principles underpinning blended learning, which constrained my practice of blended learning at that time.

After conducting this study, I realise that the adoption of blended learning and the LMS in my institution appeared to intensify teacher-centred education rather than transforming existing pedagogical cultures. I have also learned that we are bound by our own cultural upbringing; in my case, Confucian thinking and practices. Reflecting on my own experience, I had struggled a lot while doing this research. I felt hard to think outside of my comfort zone, to broaden my knowledge about Western pedagogies and blended learning and to try to be an independent thinker. It is, therefore, for my colleagues and students I teach, not going to be easy to accept to change their own beliefs and practices either.

I think any development of blended learning in Confucian cultures needs to consider students' needs and teachers' roles beyond the Confucian framework. Blended learning in English teaching should be adopted according to constructivist learning theory so as to achieve its potential benefits such as training students to be active, critical and creative. Constructivist learning theory with a focus on active learning process and collaborative learning appeared to challenge the traditional teacher-centred pedagogy framed by Confucian values in Vietnam. However, such challenge can be reduced to gain the benefits of blended learning if there is active participation of different stakeholders (e.g., institutional leaders, programme leaders, IT staff, teachers and students) in the process of transforming current traditional teaching and learning beliefs and practices radically. Teachers should have opportunities to reflect on their teaching and explore blended learning while students should be encouraged to talk about their prior knowledge, learning needs, strengths or struggles in blended learning environments. Students also need to be given a platform to actively participate in their learning, to control/take responsibility for their learning, and to get support that they need. Moreover, open and collaborative discussions among people involved in the blended learning project might be helpful to create necessary changes needed for the adoption of blended learning.

I have also widened my understanding of EFL blended learning as a result of this PhD study. My supervisors provided me with advanced academic training, which led me to enculturation into disciplinary knowledge and become a self-regulated learner. I will share the knowledge and experience that I gained through my PhD in New Zealand with my colleges and students when I come back to my home country to inspire them to actively participate in exploring and adapting to blended learning pedagogy.

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Appendices

Appendix A: WEBLEI questionnaire

Table 1.1. WEBLEI Scales and Items

Scale I: Access
1. I can access the learning activities at times convenient to me.
2. The online material is available at locations suitable for me.
3. I can use time saved in travelling and on campus class attendance for study and other commitments.
4. I am allowed to work at my own pace to achieve learning objectives.
5. I decide how much I want to learn in a given period.
6. I decide when I want to learn.
7. The flexibility allows me to meet my learning goals.
8. The flexibility allows me to explore my own areas of interest.
Scale II: Interaction
1. I communicate with other students in this subject electronically (email, bulletin boards, chat line).
2. In this learning environment, I have to be self-disciplined in order to learn.
3. I have the autonomy to ask my tutor what I do not understand.
4. I have the autonomy to ask other students what I do not understand.
5. Other students respond promptly to my queries.
6. I regularly participate in self-evaluations.
7. I regularly participate in peer-evaluations.
8. I was supported by positive attitude from my peers.

Table 1.1. Continued

Scale III: Response
1. This mode of learning enables me to interact with other students and the tutor asynchronously.
2. I felt a sense of satisfaction and achievement about this learning environment.
3. I enjoy learning in this environment.
4. I could learn more in this environment.
5. It is easy to organise a group for a project.
6. It is easy to work collaboratively with other students involved in a group project.
7. The web-based learning environment held my interest throughout my course of study.
8. I felt a sense of boredom towards the end of my course of study.
Scale IV: Results
1. The scope or learning objectives are clearly stated in each lesson.
2. The organisation of each lesson is easy to follow.
3. The structure keeps me focused on what is to be learned.
4. Expectations of assignments are clearly stated in my unit.
5. Activities are planned carefully.
6. The subject content is appropriate for delivery on the Web.
7. The presentation of the subject content is clear.
8. The quiz in the web-based materials enhances my learning process.

Copied from Chang and Fisher (2003)

Appendix B: Online student survey

Dear Student,

My name is Tran Le Thu Ha, I am currently undertaking my PhD at the University of Waikato. I want to learn from you about factors affecting your blended learning experience as you learn English.

Thank you for agreeing to complete this 10-15 minute survey and let me use the aggregated information (anonymously) to help understand what Blended Learning is like. Undertaking this survey is entirely voluntary.

SECTION 1: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Please read the following questions and answer them by checking the appropriate box

1. I am:

   ☐ Male
   ☐ Female
   ☐ Other

2. I am studying in:

   ☐ Faculty A
   ☐ Faculty B
   ☐ Faculty C

3. I have been studying English for:

   ☐ 0-5 years
   ☐ 6-10 years
   ☐ 11-15 years
   ☐ 15+ years

SECTION 2: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE WITH TECHNOLOGY

Please read the following questions and answer them by checking the appropriate box

4. I use the following internet capable devices when I study English (Tick all that apply)

   ☐ Desktop computer
   ☐ Laptop
   ☐ Tablet
   ☐ Ipod
   ☐ Ipad
   ☐ Smartphone

5. I found the following tools useful for studying English

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
Electronic dictionary	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar checker	1	2	3	4	5
Automatic speech recognition (ASR) and pronunciation program	1	2	3	4	5
Social networking such as Facebook	1	2	3	4	5
Blog	1	2	3	4	5
Internet forum or message board	1	2	3	4	5
Wiki	1	2	3	4	5

6. In general, I enjoy using digital technologies (Mark only one box)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Strongly agree

7. In general, I feel confident using digital technologies (Mark only one box)

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

SETION 3: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF ENGLISH BLENDED COURSES

The following statements are about different aspects of English blended courses.
Please read each item carefully and answer them by checking the appropriate box.

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
8. I could access the learning activities whenever I want	1	2	3	4	5
9. I could work at my own speed to achieve learning objectives	1	2	3	4	5
10. I could decide how much I wanted to learn in a given period.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I communicated with other students in this course electronically (email, bulletin boards, chat room).	1	2	3	4	5
12. I had to be self-disciplined in order to learn.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I had the freedom to ask my teacher what I did not understand.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I had the freedom to ask other students what I did not understand	1	2	3	4	5
15. Other students responded promptly to my requests for help.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I was regularly asked to evaluate my own work.	1	2	3	4	5
17. My classmates and I were asked to evaluate each other's work	1	2	3	4	5
18. I felt a sense of satisfaction about the blended learning environment	1	2	3	4	5
19. It was easy to work together with other students in involved in group work in the blended learning environment	1	2	3	4	5

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
20. It was easy to work together with other students in involved in group work in my English courses	1	2	3	4	5
21. The blended learning environment made me motivated to learn English	1	2	3	4	5
22. The blended learning environment kept me engaged in studying English	1	2	3	4	5
23. Having both online and face-to-face components allowed me to meet my learning goals	1	2	3	4	5
24. There was a good balance between online and classroom activities	1	2	3	4	5
25. The online and classroom activities worked well together	1	2	3	4	5
26. The learning objectives were clearly stated in each class lesson	1	2	3	4	5
27. The organization of each online lesson was easy to follow	1	2	3	4	5
28. The organization of each classroom lesson was easy to follow	1	2	3	4	5
29. Expectations of online tasks were clearly stated	1	2	3	4	5
30. Expectations of classroom tasks were clearly stated	1	2	3	4	5
31. The content of the English courses was appropriate for delivery in a blended learning environment	1	2	3	4	5
32. The presentation of English course content was clear	1	2	3	4	5
33. The teacher encouraged students to work together and help each other	1	2	3	4	5
34. The teacher provided opportunities for me to learn in different ways	1	2	3	4	5
35. The teacher gave me quick feedback on my work	1	2	3	4	5
36. The teacher was ready to answer my questions	1	2	3	4	5

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
37. The teacher kept students engaged in studying English during class time	1	2	3	4	5
38. I was more interested in my English courses at the university	1	2	3	4	5
39. I felt that the quality of my interaction with teachers in my English courses at the university increased	1	2	3	4	5
40. I felt that the quality of my interaction with other students in my English courses at the university increased	1	2	3	4	5
41. I was overwhelmed with information and resources in my English courses at the university	1	2	3	4	5
42. I felt anxious in my English courses at the university	1	2	3	4	5
43. I faced difficulties in managing my time in my English courses at the university	1	2	3	4	5
44. I felt isolated during my English courses at the university	1	2	3	4	5
45. I had difficulties in using digital technologies to study in my English courses at the university	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix C: Student interview questions

Elements of Activity theory	Questions
Subject	- How long have you been learning English? - What faculty are you in?
Tools	-In the beginning of the semester did your teacher provide you with some training around blended learning? And how do you know about blended learning environments. (Probes: Did he/she explain to you what you need to do in your course?/ Did he/she explained digital tools such as the LMS, electronic dictionary, pronunciation program, chat, wiki, blog? How did he/she train you to use these technologies in studying English?) -What digital tools have you used while studying in your English blended courses, and how did you describe your experience in using digital tools in studying English blended courses? -What are your views on blended courses activities? (Probe: How do you think about the instructions, the levels of difficulty and appropriateness of online activities/face-to-face activities? Did online and face-to-face activities enhance each other?)
Rules	- How do you think about the current testing and assessment in your blended learning courses? (Probes: What types of testing and assessment were used during the courses? / How do you describe about your experiences of different types of testing and assessment throughout the whole course such as online tests, written test, oral test). -Did teachers give you feedback and how did you experience the

Elements of Activity theory	Questions
	teacher's feedback?
Division of labour	- In what ways you can self-regulate your learning in English courses? (Probes: How did you feel when asking teachers what you did not understand?/ How did you evaluate your own work and your friends' work?/ How did you manage your time and your own pace in learning in your English courses? - How did teachers encourage you to engage and participate in learning activities? (Probes: In what ways did your teachers give instructions to learning activities? / In what ways did they guide you work in pairs and work in groups? In what ways did they encourage you to ask questions and share ideas with peers?)
Object	-What benefits did the English blended courses bring you?
Outcomes	-What challenges you faced when you learnt in a blended learning environment? (Probes: What made you feel bored or anxious about your blended learning courses? / What caused troubles to you in using technologies in studying English? (internet connectivity, levels of technology competence) -Do you think English blended courses helped you to improve your learning outcomes? If yes, what areas/skills you could improve at the end of your English blended courses?

Appendix D: Teacher interview questions

Elements of Activity theory	Questions
Subject	-Please briefly describe your teaching background (Probes: What age are you? / How long have you been working at our university? /How long you have been teaching English blended courses?)
Tools	-What does blended learning mean to you? -What are the benefits of blended learning for you, your students and institutions? -Did you understand the course design and the proportion of online components in compared to face-to-face components? Which was the lead in the blending? -How did you change your pedagogy when teaching in a blended learning environment? -What was the function of LMS? - What are your views on blended courses activities? (Probes: How do you think about the instructions, the levels of difficulty and appropriateness of online activities/face-to-face activities? Did online and F2F activities enhance each other?)
Rules	-Did you receive training prior to implementing blended learning? and if yes how would you describe the training you received around blended learning. -How do you think about the current English language

Elements of Activity theory	Questions
	testing and assessment in your institution? (Probes: What types of testing and assessment were used during the blended learning courses/ How effective the different forms of assessment were in assessing students' learning in a blended learning environment?) -What factors facilitate or hinder you in implementing blended learning? (Probes: Did you feel comfortable when teaching blended learning courses? Do you think that you have sufficient knowledge and skills to teach English in a blended mode? / Did you have an increased workload when teaching blended learning courses?)
Division of labour	-Do you think that your role has been changed when teaching in blended learning environments? - How did you facilitate students' learning in blended learning classes? (Probes: What did you do to build up and reinforce the relationship with students and between students?/ What did you do to encourage students to articulate their understanding and learning problems?/ Did you require students to work in pairs and groups? If yes, how? / If no, why not? Did you facilitate students' pair and group work and sometimes get involved to help them? If yes, how? / If no, why not?

Elements of Activity theory	Questions
	-Did you often give feedback to your students and in what ways? -Did you ask your students to assess their peers? If no, why not? /If yes, what do you do to ask them to carry out peer-assessment? - What did you do to develop students' ability to take control of their own learning? (Probes: Did you train students to regulate their own learning? /Did you share with your students the teaching objectives, learning expectations and assessment criteria? If yes, how or if no, why not? / Did you show or help students to get access to material sources or online programs for their independent learning and in what ways? /Did you ask your students to pay attention to your feedback on their peers and reflect on their own learning? / Did you ask students to carry out self-assessment? If yes, what do you do to prepare students for self-assessment?
Outcomes	-Do you think English blended courses helped your students to improve their learning outcomes? If yes, what areas/skills they could improve at the end of English blended courses?

Appendix E: Programme leader interview questions

Elements of Activity theory	Questions
Subject	- Please briefly describe your background: (Probes: How long have you been working in tertiary education? / How long at the university in particular? / What is the highest degree you completed?
Tools, Rules and Division of Labour	- How do you think about blended learning approaches in teaching English? - What changes in teachers' pedagogy and learners' roles required for teaching or learning in blended environments? Why? - What did you know about the guidelines or policies about the implementation of English blended learning courses in your institution? -Did you receive any training before and during your blended course design? If yes, how did you describe your training? - What are your guiding principles when designing English blended learning courses? (Probes: How have you considered your learners' needs, the skills and experience they have to study in blended learning environments? / How have you considered the role of digital technologies such as the LMS tools, teachers and learners interaction patterns in the blended courses such as teacher-centred or student-centred approaches?

Elements of Activity theory	Questions
	-What were your rationales for deciding what topics/skill areas to cover online and which ones to cover face-to-face? -How did you make online components and face-to-face components enhance each other?
Object/outcomes	-How effective is the current implementation of English blended courses in comparison with expected outcomes in your opinion? -What factors inhibit or facilitate the effective implementation of English blended courses at your institution?

Appendix F: Output of factor analysis

Total Variance Explained

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Factor	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	13.393	36.198	36.198	13.033	35.225	35.225
2	3.525	9.527	45.726	3.118	8.427	43.653
3	2.587	6.992	52.718	2.169	5.862	49.515
4	1.601	4.326	57.044	1.233	3.332	52.847
5	1.460	3.947	60.991	1.127	3.046	55.893
6	1.291	3.489	64.480	.843	2.278	58.171
7	1.094	2.958	67.438	.700	1.892	60.063
8	.942	2.547	69.985			
9	.839	2.267	72.252			
10	.782	2.113	74.365			
11	.773	2.090	76.454			
12	.656	1.774	78.228			
13	.651	1.759	79.987			
14	.539	1.457	81.444			
15	.516	1.396	82.839			
16	.496	1.342	84.181			
17	.458	1.237	85.418			

18	.423	1.142	86.560			
19	.397	1.073	87.633			
20	.381	1.030	88.663			
21	.373	1.009	89.672			
22	.362	.978	90.651			
23	.348	.941	91.592			
24	.333	.899	92.491			
25	.324	.877	93.368			
26	.295	.798	94.166			
27	.280	.758	94.923			
28	.257	.695	95.619			
29	.239	.647	96.266			
30	.223	.603	96.869			
31	.205	.555	97.424			
32	.189	.511	97.934			
33	.185	.501	98.435			
34	.174	.471	98.906			
35	.152	.410	99.315			
36	.135	.366	99.681			

37	.118	.319	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.

Appendix G: The first factor analysis with promax rotation

Pattern Matrix[a]

	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
The learning objectives were clearly stated in each class lesson.	.905				
The organization of each online lesson was easy to follow.	.883				
Expectations of online tasks were clearly stated.	.830				
Expectations of classroom tasks were clearly stated.	.781				
The organization of each classroom lesson is easy to follow.	.716				
The presentation of the English course content was clear.	.591				
The online and classroom activities worked well together.	.551				
The content of the English courses was appropriate for delivery in a blended learning environment.	.529				
There was a good balance between online and classroom activities.	.520				
Having both online and face-to-face components allowed me to meet my learning goals.					
I could work at my own speed to achieve learning objectives.					

The teacher was ready to answer my questions.		.889			
The teacher encouraged students to work together and help each other.		.796			
The teacher gave me quick feedback on my work.		.795			
The teacher provided opportunities for me to learn in different ways.		.794			
The teacher kept students engaged in studying English during class time.		.761			
I felt that the quality of my interaction with teachers in my English courses at the university increased.					
I felt that the quality of my interaction with other students in my English courses at the university increased.					
I was more interested in my English courses at the University.					
I was regularly asked to evaluate my own work.			.640		
My classmates and I were asked to evaluate each other's work.			.631		
Other students responded promptly to my requests for help.			.584		
I had the freedom to ask other students what I did not understand.			.580		
I had the freedom to ask my teacher what I did not understand.			.554		

I communicated with other students in this course electronically (email, bulletin boards, chat room).					
I could decide how much I wanted to learn in a given period.					
I had to be self-disciplined in order to learn.					
I felt isolated during my English courses at the university.				.807	
I felt anxious in my English courses at the university.				.765	
I faced difficulties in managing my time in in my English courses at the university.				.764	
I was overwhelmed with information and resources in my English courses at the university.				.729	
I had difficulties in using digital technologies to study in my English courses at the university.				.680	
The blended learning environment made me motivated to learn English.					.934
The blended learning environment kept me engaged in studying English					.862
I felt a sense of satisfaction about the blended learning environment					.638
It was easy to work together with other students involved in group work in the blended learning environment.					.571
I could access the learning activities whenever I want.					

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.

Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.[a]

a. Rotation converged in 10 iterations.

Appendix H: Letter of information

Dear participant,

My name is Tran Le Thu Ha, I am currently undertaking my PhD at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. The working title of my study is: *"Factors affecting the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning environment in a Vietnamese university*. This research aims to identify critical factors that contribute to affecting the teaching and learning of English in a blended learning approach in a Vietnamese university context.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research as an interview participant, and very much hope that you will agree to participate.

If you are willing, you will be attending a semi-structured interview for approximately 45 minutes. These will be held in the meeting room in A2 building or at a venue of your choice.

I plan to audio-record the interviews and transcribe all the relevant data. The audio files and the transcripts will be kept in my private, password protected computer, for later analysis. The data will be assessed only by me and my supervisors. The names of all participants will be secured using pseudonyms, and care will be taken to ensure no individual can be reported in the thesis or in any resulting publication, but this cannot be guaranteed.

I hope you will participate in this project. If you agree, I would be grateful if you could complete the consent form below, retaining a copy of this letter and the form for your personal records. Please note that you may withdraw participation from the project at any time prior to the commencement of the data analysis phase, with no need to give any reason for doing so.

Once you have given your consent I will make the interview questions available to you and set up an interview time and place that suits you.

If you need to know more information about my study, please contact me at ltht1@students.waikato.ac.nz or call me at +64 221353038. You can also contact my chief supervisor by email: Dr Noeline Wright at noeline.wright@waikato.ac.nz

Thank you

Yours faithfully

Tran Le Thu Ha

If you agree to grant me permission to interview you_____, please sign the consent form attached.

_____

Appendix I: Consent form for the participants

Please complete the following checklist. Tick [√] the appropriate box for each point.

Statements	YES	NO
I understand that I do not have to take part in this study.		
I understand that I am entitled to withdraw participation at any time prior to the commencement of the data analysis phase, with no need to give any reason for doing so.		
I agree to let Ha interview me		
I agree that this interview can be audio-recorded		
I understand that the data obtained for this project will only be accessed by Ha and her academic supervisors and that data will be used for academic purposes only		
I understand that my rights to privacy and confidentiality will be respected, but complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed		
I understand that my returning this completed form and returning this to Ha means my agreement to participate in the research		
I would like to receive a report of the findings resulting from this study		

Participant: _____ Researcher: _____

Signature: _____ Signature: _____

Date: _____ Date: _____