EFL High School Students’ Perceptions of Benefits and Challenges of Blended Learning in Reading Lessons: A Case in the Mekong Delta

Abstract: Blended learning is emerging as a modern teaching approach of the school educational system in many countries. Moreover, blended learning in reading lessons from EFL high school students’ perceptions is a rather new field in the Mekong Delta- Vietnam. For these reasons, the study tried to reveal EFL high school students’ perceptions of benefits and challenges of blended learning in reading lessons. The study was conducted as a descriptive study under concurrent nested design in which thirty-six close-ended items are embedded within three open-ended items in the questionnaire. Sixty (60) high school students in grade 10 participated in the study. The findings showed that students achieved more benefits than faced challenges in blended reading lessons. Finally, the suggested pedagogical implications of blended learning in reading lessons from EFL high schools’ perceptions are contributed to the innovation of teaching reading lessons in the high school context in the Mekong Delta- Vietnam.

Keywords: EFL high school students, perceptions, blended learning, benefits, challenges, Mekong Delta.

INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the world, reading has traditionally played an important role as the most emphasized skill in the EFL context and this is still true today. Indonesia may serve as a good example: Reading comprehension might be considered as a challenging aspect of studying English for Indonesian secondary school students (Syahabuddin, Yusny, & Zahara, 2019). The Chinese researchers also stated that Reading is an indispensable skill for learners in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, and foreign language reading comprehension is an interactive and complex process (Lu, 1989; Xu, 1999). Many EFL high school students do not know how to handle the process of reading and they have problems in comprehending the texts, which causes a lack of interest in reading and thus creates quite a problem for the system of education.

The field- the scope of information and communication technologies in education- attracts many researchers to study: the importance of computer technologies integration in the learning process (Matuknin & Evseeva, 2014), using blogs in creating special opportunities for language learning (Buran, 2015). Information communication technology (ICT) has made great contributions to the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. According to Thorne (2003), blended learning is the most logical and natural evolution of our learning agenda. Using blended learning, a combination of online digital media and traditional face-to-face method. Therefore, the researchers have explored the combination of blended learning and reading such as Behjat (2011), Tsai and Talley (2013), and Alaidarous et al., (2016).

Definitions of “Perception”

It has been researched for a long time that the term "perception" is a novel idea. According to Gardner (1985), perception is an evaluation responding to a referent or cognitive object, based on personal beliefs or opinions about the referent. To add to the definition provided by Smith (2001), he described that perception refers to the process of sorting out, analyzing, and integrating stimuli involving our sense organs and brain. As stated by Wang (2007), “Perception” is a higher level of processing which refers to awareness of human experience.
Moreover, Lightbown and Spada (1990) defined that perceptions are the basis of success or failure in language learning, depending on the learner’s perception. A later study by Brown (1994) revealed that he found that language learners benefit from positive perceptions, whereas negative perceptions may lead to the unsuccessful attainment of proficiency. Students’ answers and perspectives of the learning process, learning techniques, and learning environment are also known as student perception, according to Kiflaini (2021). Perception, according to these definitions, is the act of absorbing information, explaining it, and generating meaning based on personal ideas or views about a referenced object. Language students’ learning processes may be impacted by both positive and negative views, which can lead to both good and bad outcomes.

In this study, EFL high school students’ perceptions are their opinions on the benefits and challenges of blended learning in reading lessons.

The nature of “Blended learning”

The definitions of “Blended learning” have a broad nature and its meaning has changed over time. The origin definition was released by EPIC learning- an Atlanta-based computer skill certification and software training business- in 1999:

The company currently operates 220 online courses but will begin offering its Internet courseware using the company’s Blended Learning methodology [sic]. Select courses will continue to offer the traditional course content online, but will also offer live instruction and other collaborative components, all from the student’s desktop. (PR Newswire, March 5, 1999, n.p.; emphasis added)

The definition in this news is not clearly understood. Then, the strength and effectiveness of combining two different forms of learning were emphasized by Garrison and Kanuka (2004), who claimed that the strengths of synchronous (face-to-face) and asynchronous (text-based Internet) learning activities. One of the influential early definitions was that of Graham (2006), who proposed that blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction. In addition, Chew, Jones and Tuner (2008) added that blended learning involves the combination of two fields of concern: education and educational technology. Staker and Horn (2012) and Watson and Murin (2014) had a similar view with expanded versions; Blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least in part a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home. In short, blended learning is the combination of face-to-face and online learning activities that students can control over time, place, path, and/or pace within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.

The nature of “Reading”

Reading is one of the important skills in learning English besides listening, writing, and speaking. Reading generally involves two skills namely decoding and understanding (Songsiri, 2007, Sulam et al., 2019). In addition, reading is a symbolic process of seeing an item or symbol and translating it into an idea or image. Images are processed into concepts and whole dimensions of thought. (Bennette, 1997). According to Wixson et al., (1987), reading is the process of creating meaning that involves: (a) the reader’s existing knowledge; (b) the text information; (c) the reading context. In a similar study, Ningsih et al., (2014) explored that reading refers to the ability to understand or create meaning from written texts. Thus, reading is the process to create meanings or decode the messages in the text according to the level of proficiency in reading.

To sum up, reading is not only the process in which the readers read the words, phrases, sentences, or even the text but also by reading, they have to decode the words, analyze various sources of information and comprehend the meaning in the text.

The Roles of Blended Learning in Reading Lessons

Reading skill, considered as one of the language skills, forms the stepping stone for the education of a student. Though comprehending hypertexts in blended reading lessons is sometimes difficult for students, they are able to achieve the goal through using reading skills and strategies. Especially, global communication has been changing, technological literacy is considered one of the 21st-century skills. Computer and Internet technology enable hypertext and hypermedia to play a role in the comprehension of foreign languages. Szymańska and Kaczmarek (2011) argued that students want to become proficient readers in a foreign language, they need to have access to online texts which can help them to respond in an authentic way to what they have read. Especially, Behjat et.al (2011) emphasized that reading hypertexts can also help students be able to analyze the text by themselves, reflect on it, and try to comprehend it independent of asking for help from a teacher. Finally, Szymańska and Kaczmarek (2011) concluded that learners improved in a blended learning reading course using both printed and online texts in terms of both recall and comprehension of the texts.

Based on the previous studies, blended learning plays an important role in reading lessons in the 21st century. Reading hypertexts can help students approach technological literacy that they need to equip in modern communication.
SOME PREVIOUS STUDIES
Some previous studies about blended learning and reading

Many studies related to blended learning and reading. An early study was carried out by Behjat et al., (2012) with participating of 107 university students. This study aims to discover whether conventional or blended learning environments can better enhance the reading comprehension for EFL learners and the results indicated blending traditional classroom instruction with technology could help learners outperform in their reading comprehension.

Tsai and Talley (2013) conducted a study about the effect of a course management system (CMS)-supported strategy instruction on EFL reading comprehension and strategy use in Taiwan. The results of this study demonstrated Moodle-supported strategy instruction can and will facilitate the EFL students with its aims.

Some previous studies about benefits and challenges of blended learning from students’ perceptions

Alaidarous et al., (2016) investigated a study about exploring EFL students’ perception in the blended learning environment in Saudi technical education context. 109 preparatory year students experienced via a learning management system called Doroob. The study was conducted under a mixed-method approach with an online questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The results indicated students’ positive perceptions toward learning English in a blended environment.

The Study
Research aims

The study aims to (1) investigate EFL high school students’ perceptions of benefits of blended learning in reading lessons, (2) find out the challenges of blended learning in reading lessons to EFL high school students.

Research Questions
Based on the research aims, the current study attempts to find out the answers to the following questions:
1. What are EFL high school students’ perceptions of benefits of blended learning in reading lessons?
2. What are EFL high school students’ perceptions of challenges of blended learning in reading lessons?

Research Design
The study was conducted as a descriptive study under a concurrent nested design in which the qualitative strand is embedded within the prominence of the quantitative one. The thirty-five close-ended items in the questionnaire were designed to find out participants’ perceptions of the benefits and challenges of blended learning in reading lessons. Then, two open-ended items were carried out to deepen the participants’ opinions that may not be recognized from close-ended items. In brief, the combination of close-ended items and open-ended ones was employed to collect reliable and valid data. Moreover, it provided more detailed information about EFL high school students’ perceptions of benefits and challenges in reading lessons.

Participants
The chosen participants for doing the questionnaire in this study were EFL high-school students via Google Form for investigating their perceptions of benefits and challenges of blended learning in reading lessons. 60 EFL high-school students from a high school in a province in the Mekong Delta accepted to participate in the research. Table 1 summarizes the students’ personal information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As observed in Table 1, there is a significant difference in gender of participants (34 female students and 26 male students). Female students are dominant in this study.

Data Collection Instrument
In this study, a questionnaire was adapted from five different researchers: Ja’ashan (2015), Yang (2012), Phuong and Huynh (2019), Rianto (2020), and Xu (2010). The participants were asked to show their agreement and disagreement on a five-point scale adopted from Likert which ranged from (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, to (5) strongly agree. The details of each section will be illustrated below:

Section 1: Personal information requires the students to fill in the form with name (optional) and gender.

Section 2: EFL high school students’ perceptions of benefits of blended learning in reading lessons:
The 21 items (20 close-ended items and one open-ended one) belong to three main clusters, namely, reading, technology and blended mode. There are seven sub-clusters to follow three main ones including reading strategies, reading comprehension, vocabulary, accessibility, technological competence, self-regulation and interaction. Additionally, an open-ended item added at the end of this section allows students to add any other benefits of blended learning in reading lessons which do not mention in the provided statements.

Section 3: EFL high school students’ perceptions of challenges of blended learning in reading lessons:
there are 16 items (15 close-ended items and an open-ended item). It comprises 6 sub-clusters including reading strategies, integration, technology insufficiency, technological incompetence, self-regulation, and interaction. These six sub-clusters have belonged to three main clusters: reading, technology and blended learning.
mode. At the end of this section, there is one open-ended items were included for the students to type other problems they might find. This helped the questionnaire be more objective and reflective.

**Procedure**

The fully questionnaire was then delivered to 60 participants in Google Form format via email and Zalo. The participants were encouraged to complete the questionnaires as soon as possible. After one week, the researcher recollected the official questionnaires and did the next steps such as interview and data analysis.

**RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

4.1.1 EFL high school students’ perceptions of benefits of blended learning in reading lessons

A Descriptive Statistics Test was run on the total mean score of the students’ perceptions of benefits of blended learning in reading lessons. The result was indicated in Table 1.

As observed in Table 1, it can be seen that the mean score of the students’ perceptions of benefits of blended learning in reading lessons is 4.39 (M = 4.39) at the high level.

Next, a One-Sample t-test was run to evaluate whether the mean score of the students’ perceptions of benefits of blended learning in reading lessons was significantly different from the test value of 4.5, the accepted mean for a very high level. The result shows that there was significant difference between the mean score of EFL high school students’ perceptions of benefits of blended learning in reading lessons. (M=4.39; SD=.40) and the test value 4.5 (t= -2.118, df =59, p=.038<.05). The result supports the conclusion that EFL high school students perceived benefits of blended learning in reading lessons at a very high level.

As mentioned in section 2 of the questionnaire above, the first 20 items aiming to find out EFL high school students’ perceptions of blended learning in reading lessons consist of seven sub-clusters including (1) reading strategies, (2) reading comprehension, (3) vocabulary, (4) accessibility, (5) technological competence, (6) self-regulation, and (7) interaction. The Descriptive Statistics Test was used to evaluate the mean scores of each sub-cluster. Table 2 shows the results of this test.

<p>| Table 2: Descriptive statistics test on 7 sub-clusters of the students’ perceptions of benefits of blended learning in reading lessons (N=60) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading strategies</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading comprehension</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological competence</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 2, it can be seen that among seven benefits of blended learning in reading lessons, students perceived the benefits of blended learning in reading lessons in the following rank: **vocabulary** (M = 4.52), **technological competence** (M= 4.49), **accessibility** (M = 4.45), **self-regulation** (M = 4.43), **reading strategies** (M = 4.33), **reading comprehension** (M = 4.32), and **interaction** (M = 4.20). As the results, EFL high school students perceived the most benefit of blended learning in reading lessons in terms of vocabulary and the least benefit in blended reading lessons from the students’ perceptions was interaction.

The results from the open-ended question

In addition to the five-point Likert scale items of the questionnaire, the students also stated a number of benefits of blended learning in reading lessons in the open-ended item (Item 21) at the end of section 2 of the questionnaire. Vocabulary was mentioned many times from the six students’ responses. One of six students wrote:

**Blended learning helped them expand vocabulary through reading lessons.**
One student compared speed of learning vocabulary. He stated:
I could remember vocabulary faster.

Four students also concerned about time and place. One of them explained:
I could learn anywhere and anytime and I was comfortable with online learning schedule fixed with my free time.

In terms of reading comprehension, one student wrote:
Blended learning makes reading lessons easier for us to understand, to practice and to be more effective.

Another student also concerned about self-regulation. She emphasized:
Blended learning helps me practice self-study skills and I can easily find information, review the lessons many times and manage my time properly.

### 4.1.2 EFL high school students’ perceptions of challenges of blended learning in reading lessons

A Descriptive Statistics Test was run on the total mean score of challenges of blended learning in reading lessons. The total mean score of challenges of blended learning in reading lessons was 2.38. The result was indicated in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Challenges</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be seen that the total mean score of the students’ perceptions of challenges of blended learning in reading lessons (M = 2.38) fall in the low of Oxford.

Then, One-sample T Test was administrated to evaluate whether there was a difference between the level of the students’ perceptions of challenges of blended learning in reading lessons (M= 2.38 as a low level) and the test value of 2.5, the accepted mean score for the medium level. The result shows that there was no significant difference between the mean score of EFL high school students’ perceptions of challenges of blended learning in reading lessons. (M=2.38; SD=.84) and the test value 2.5 ($t=-1.013, df =59, p=.031<.05$).

The result supports the conclusion that EFL high school students perceived challenges of blended learning in reading lessons at a medium level.

As mentioned in section 3 of questionnaire above, the first 15 items aiming to find out EFL high school students’ perceptions of blended learning in reading lessons. It comprises six sub-clusters including reading strategies, integration, technological insufficiency, technological incompetence, self-regulation, and interaction. The Descriptive Statistics Test was used to evaluate the mean scores of each sub-cluster. Table 4 shows the results of this test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Mean= 2.38 (M=2.38)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

From Table 4, it can be seen that among six challenges of blended learning in reading lessons, students perceived the challenges of blended learning in reading lessons in the following rank self-regulation (M = 2.61), interaction (M = 2.43), technological insufficiency (M = 2.37), integration (M = 2.30), technological incompetence (M = 2.28), and reading strategies (M=2.25). As the results, EFL high school students perceived the most challenge of blended learning in reading lessons in terms of self-regulation and the least challenge in blended reading lessons from the students’ perceptions was reading strategies.

### The Results from the Close-Ended Question

Additionally, an open-ended item (item 16) of section 3 (EFL high students’ perceptions of challenges of blended learning in reading lessons). The students
presented some other challenges and their choice for future learning mode.

In the terms of other challenges, the internet was mentioned many times. Seven students had the same idea that the internet was weak and unstable in their learning process.

Moreover, two students indicated technological incompetence. They wrote:

*I cannot look for materials to serve for reading assignments by myself.*

*The functions on the platform are not easy to use so I have to spend a lot of time to understand how to use them.*

Interaction was of concern of some students when they learned reading lessons in online sessions. Another student stated

*I cannot discuss the problems with the teacher directly.*

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION**

This study showed that the students achieved the most benefit in vocabulary, which revealed that learning reading lessons through integrating in-class and online helped students review, expand and guess the meaning of vocabulary in the texts. It was similar to the findings of Altalhab (2016), which showed that all of the teachers involved in this study perceived learning vocabulary through reading as a beneficial strategy to expanding students’ vocabulary and most of the students shared this view. Next, Radial (2019) stated that Students exhibit a raised awareness towards the importance of F2F direct instruction, teacher-students and student-to-student interaction in their learning achievements. It was consistent with the findings in this study; the students felt that blended learning helps them learn how to read a lot through interactive activities in which I can discuss texts with each other.

Results about the challenges of blended learning in reading lessons were in line with Launer’s findings (2010) in terms of self-regulation. Launer stated that not many students are able to carry out the self-regulated learning practices required in a blended learning environment. From the interview, some students complained that they cannot completely control their learning plan in blended reading lessons. In addition, the least challenge found in this study was reading strategies. It meant that reading strategies were also the challenges for the students but they did not affect so much. This result of the current research was congruent with Yang’s results (2012); he stated that through reflection, students identified their difficulties in employing the reading strategies, which might impede their reading comprehension.

When implementing blended learning in reading lessons, teachers should pay attention to a number of issues. First, training how to use online learning platform is very important in blended learning. Adequate and detailed instructions on how to use online learning platform should be offered at the initial stage to avoid ambiguity and nervousness. Second, interactive activities on both face-to-face and online learning are recommended to increase teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction and to reduce students’ reading difficulties.

**CONCLUSION**

The research on “High school students’ perceptions of benefits and challenges of blended learning in reading lessons” has reached its aims. The students highly perceived benefits in blended reading lessons in terms of vocabulary, technological competence, accessibility, self-regulation, reading strategies, reading comprehension, and interaction. However, the students also presented some challenges such as self-regulation, interaction, technological insufficiency, integration, technological incompetence, and reading strategies. There have been many studies on blended learning recently. However, most of them focus on higher education, this is a chance to investigate EFL high school students’ perceptions of the implementation of blended learning in reading lessons. Hopefully, the research will shed light on improving the quality of teaching and learning EFL reading at high schools in the Mekong Delta-Vietnam.

**Acknowledgement**

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