

Comparative Study on the Implementation of Blended English Teaching in Private and Public Universities in China

Haihang Zhang

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
Email: 2022966983@student.uitm.edu.my

Jamiah Binti Baba

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
Corresponding author Email: jamia021@uitm.edu.my

Wan Nurul Elia Binti Haslee Sharil

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
Email: nurulelia@uitm.edu.my

Changli Yuan

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
Email: yuanchangli@xfjphd.cn

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Abstract

With the reform and development of globalized education, blended learning has become a commonly used learning model in higher education. Nevertheless, there are differences in the implementation of blended learning between public and private universities due to the distinct characteristics of these two types of institutions. This study examined the perceptions of blended learning among students and teachers from one public and one private university. The findings indicate that both groups recognize the benefits of blended learning, such as improved student performance, diversified teaching methods, and increased student interest. However, differences emerged: public university students criticized outdated online content, while private universities effectively met student needs with up-to-date materials. Private university students, who often struggle with foundational skills and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) interest, benefit from the engaging and diverse nature of blended learning. Enhanced teacher supervision in private universities also helps cultivate better study habits. Additionally, private universities' financial flexibility allows for timely adoption of new technologies and resources, making them more responsive to current issues. Interviews with EFL heads further highlight that private universities focus on current adjustments, while public

universities plan for future trends. Overall, private universities appear better equipped to leverage the advantages of blended learning for improved EFL outcomes.

Keywords: Blended Learning, English as a Foreign Language, Private University, Public University

Introduction

We inhabit a world of swift change, where emerging technologies are already reshaping everyday life (McDiarmid&Zhao,2023). In contemporary times, the rapid advancements in ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) are impacting various domains, including education. The conventional approach of using blackboards and verbal teaching in classrooms is gradually being supplanted (Jong & Tan, 2021). Due to advancements in technology and changes in teaching methods aimed at delivering content and involving students in collaborative learning, blended learning has become increasingly popular, particularly in higher education (Shin et al., 2018).

Blended learning is an innovative concept that combines the benefits of traditional classroom teaching with ICT supported learning, encompassing both offline and online learning (Dangwal, 2017). This educational approach is referred to as a hybrid innovation in pedagogy, blending traditional and modern methods of teaching and learning (Margolis, 2018). This approach is gaining popularity in many prestigious universities worldwide due to its ability to enhance learning standards, increase exam pass rates, offer flexible scheduling, and eliminate distance barriers (Rasheed, et al., 2020). Furthermore, blended learning has garnered increased acceptance among educators (Atwa et al., 2022). In China, the blended learning mode stands out as a leading educational reform and is increasingly being adopted in higher education language learning (Wang & Nuttall, 2018).

However, there are significant challenges in the practical application of blended learning. The development of blended learning in China is still in progress both in private and public university. They share certain characteristics, yet also exhibit distinct attributes (Naidu& Derani, 2016). Private universities in China, like those worldwide, typically rely on funding from student tuition fees and occasionally receive donations from external sources. In contrast, public universities are predominantly funded by the government (Deephhouse & Suchman, 2008). This financial setup places a heavier burden on private universities, with more than 90% of their revenue derived from tuition fees. As a result, this financial dependence significantly impacts campus operations, recruitment efforts, and the quality of education and research (Lin, et al., 2005). In addition, administrative freedom is another characteristic of private universities, allowing them to design more innovative curricula and learning environments (Yuk, 2019).

In discussing public and private university curricula, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) benefits significantly from blended learning. This approach revolutionizes EFL education by reducing reliance on traditional methods and promoting flexible, anytime/anywhere learning (Rahim, 2019). With limited class hours, technological approaches are crucial for lifelong learning (Ju & Mei, 2018). Blended learning allows EFL educators to facilitate language practice both inside and outside the classroom.

Based on the differing scales and characteristics of public and private universities, this paper aims to explore the implementation of blended learning in EFL courses across these types of institutions. By examining the advantages of blended learning relative to traditional teaching methods, the study seeks to determine which type of university better leverages the benefits of blended learning. This paper aims to explore how public and private universities can more effectively utilize the advantages of blended learning in EFL to achieve optimal outcomes by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do teachers at public and private universities perceive the blended learning model?
2. How do students at public and private universities perceive the blended learning model?
3. What are the differences between public and private universities in providing online learning platforms and technical support?
4. What are the differences in teaching effectiveness between public and private universities within the blended learning model?

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, as it is effective in capturing participants' diverse perspectives and learning experiences, allowing researchers to explore complex phenomena in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research fundamentally involves asking open-ended questions like how and why, whose answers are not easily quantified (Cleland, 2017). It typically involves direct personal experiences, with the goal of achieving a deep understanding (Peterson, 2019). The study primarily uses semi-structured interviews to compare the perceptions of blended learning between instructors and students in public and private universities. It also examines the support provided for blended learning and the effectiveness of blended learning in both types of institutions, aiming to determine which type of university is more suitable for blended learning.

Participants

The study was conducted in one private university and one public university in Guiyang, China. The private university was developed with the support of the public university. Both institutions share similarities in educational philosophy, school organization, textbooks, and syllabi. To compare the perceptions of blended learning among EFL students and teachers in both universities, the study was conducted within the same educational system and using the same textbooks, thereby eliminating the impact of differences in course difficulty. For example, if the courses at the public university were more challenging than those at the private university, and the exams were also more difficult, students and teachers at the public university might question the effectiveness of teaching and blended learning. Therefore, selecting a public and a private university that use the same textbooks, educational philosophy, and objectives helps to eliminate confounding factors such as varying course difficulties and testing differences.

According to Marshall et al. (2013), single case study should typically include between 15 and 30 interviews. Therefore, this study will interview twenty participants: five students and five teachers (including one head of the EFL course) from one private university, and five students and five teachers (including one head of the EFL course) from one public university. To understand the support provided for EFL course from both universities, purposeful sampling was employed to invite the heads of the English programs at both institutions for interviews. The head directors recommended the other four teachers from each university. Five students,

identified as relatively active in their EFL classes, were nominated by their teachers. To protect their privacy, the students from the private university are designated as PRS1, PRS2, etc., while the teachers are labeled as PRT1, PRT2, etc. The students from the public university are named PUS1, PUS2, etc., and the teachers are referred to as PUT1, PUT2, etc.

Instruments

Two semi-structured interview protocols were utilized, providing a flexible framework where target teachers and students were asked a series of questions. These questions were not be strictly ordered, allowing participants to freely discuss their experiences. Open-ended questions will prompt participants to express their ideas and perceptions, with the sequence of subsequent questions determined by their responses (Dearnley, 2005). Through these semi-structured interviews, this study aims to explore the perceptions and effectiveness of EFL in blended learning among private and public university populations. Two distinct semi-structured interview protocols were used: one for students and one for teachers. The same interview protocol was used for teachers from both types of universities, and all students used the protocol prepared for students. The interview protocols had been validated by two experts specializing in English prior to data collection.

Results

Data collection and organization were primarily conducted based on three aspects: perception of blended learning with first three questions, technical support of blended learning from question four to six, and teaching effectiveness of blended learning from question 7 to 8. Additional one more question for head of EFL were added at last in teachers' interview. The perception of blended learning addresses RQ 1 and RQ2, technical support of blended learning addresses RQ 3, and teaching effectiveness of blended learning and extra question for head address RQ 4.

The findings for first question is whether blended learning is currently being utilized. All respondents indicated that they are indeed using blended learning. The results for the second question regarding the perception of blended learning in EFL courses under the perception of blended learning are as follows: Nine out of ten students from private university and public university hold positive attitude about EFL learning within the environment of blended learning. However, one of the students from the public university had an opposing view :

"I don't think blended learning has helped me. On the contrary, it has somewhat increased my burden, making EFL learning more complicated."(PUS2)

All five teachers from the private university and five teachers from the public university held positive views on blended learning. They almost unanimously agreed that blended learning is impactful and beneficial. For example, some teacher said:

"Blended learning is excellent. I am continually learning and exploring. It has taught me a lot of new content."(PRT1)

"I can accept blended learning, and many of my colleagues around me also use this method for teaching." (PUT5)

Question 3 addresses the advantages of blended learning. According to responses from 10

teachers, comprising both private and public university educators, nine emphasized the flexibility in time and space that blended learning offers. Among them, three public university teachers and two private university teachers highlighted that blended learning, in contrast to the singular mode of traditional teaching, can stimulate learning interest among certain students and create opportunities for student interaction and participation. Additionally, two out of five private university teachers mentioned the high-quality online resources are available, such as excellent courses shared on platforms like the outstanding teachers online platform. These resources help mitigate the shortage of faculty expertise in private universities, allowing private university students to learn from top university instructors.

"Blended learning allows students to access some teaching content online at any time and place. This flexible learning mode can reduce students' stress and sense of urgency, making their self-directed learning more effective. Additionally, students can access high-quality courses online, providing them with the opportunity to participate in classes from top universities which offers them a new learning experience."(PRT1)

"Blended learning can enhance interactions between students, and between students and teachers. Many students may be passive listeners in offline classes and reluctant to participate in discussions. Conversely, in online learning, they feel there is enough space and inclusivity to participate, making them more willing to express their views and ideas."(PUT4)

The second dimension concerns the technical support for blended learning. Both the student and teacher interview outlines address the online learning platforms and tools used. Both universities utilize the Ismart online learning platform, which complements the textbook materials for online auxiliary teaching. Additionally, due to private universities' funding from social donations and tuition fees, which allows for greater discretionary spending, private university students and teachers also use paid platform resources purchased by the university. These resources include explanations for CET (China's National College English Test) helping to mitigate the shortcomings of private universities in terms of teaching resources compared to public universities. This enables students to access broader and more advanced learning concepts and knowledge.

"I use Ismart for online learning and sometime we will listen some outstanding professor's lecture which is related to our topic and CET"(PRS3)

Students generally identified two main issues with the quality of online platforms: untimely updates and the problem of some content requiring payment, as mentioned by two public university students. They expressed a desire for free software options. Another complaint from public university students was slow Internet speed, which was not mentioned by private university students in their interviews.

"I am relatively satisfied with the current online learning platforms, but it would be better if more content could be updated in a timely manner."(PUS3)

The final dimension focuses on the instructional effectiveness of blended learning. The students were also asked whether has been a change in learning outcomes due to blended learning. All ten students, from both public and private universities, reported positive changes.

Two public and three private university students noted improvements in final grades and CET scores. Additionally, two private university students mentioned increased learning initiative, shifting from passive to autonomous learning. One public university student reported improved English language skills, moving from being afraid to speak to actively engaging in conversations, attributed to online group discussions.

Regarding the teacher questionnaire on the impact of blended learning, all ten teachers reported positive effects on student' learning. Two public university teachers noted that online components make offline sessions more manageable, with preliminary online assignments and tests enhancing learning efficiency. Three private university teachers highlighted that online resources, like superior CET lectures and engaging activities, boost student interest and performance in EFL learning. Additionally, one teacher from each type of university observed that students value face-to-face interactions more and are more engaged in offline discussions, increasing the frequency and quality of in-person interactions with teachers.

The interview outline for teachers included one extra question for EFL department heads at public and private universities about the transition from traditional learning to blended learning. Both expressed approval of blended learning and noted several development issues.

Head from private university: *"As the head of the EFL department, I've seen some great changes moving from traditional learning to blended learning in recent years. These changes are mainly seen in the higher interest and engagement from students, better academic performance, and access to better learning resources. I also listen to feedback from students and teachers to adjust the content, constantly improve online resources, and open more online learning platforms. We also adopt the OBE (Outcome-Based Education) approach—focusing on what students need in their English foundation and tailoring the learning background accordingly, which wasn't possible with traditional teaching methods."*

Head from public university: *"I think blended learning is an inevitable trend as we move into an information society. The diverse learning model benefits students, teachers, and schools, though it does bring some challenges. Overall, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. The challenges we face, such as needing more supervision for students, more training for teachers, and greater investment in equipment from the school, are things we need to address."*

Discussion

The study primarily conducts interviews and records data across three dimensions of blended learning: perception, technical support, and effectiveness. Both private and public universities show adoption of this model, consistent with previous research (Pappano, 2015; Mozellus & Rydell, 2017). Students and teachers generally perceive blended teaching as effective (Wang & Nuttall, 2018; Atwa et al., 2022), with students indicating increased interest in learning. However, one public university student finds it burdensome, contrasting with private university students who report no disadvantages, differing from Cao et al.'s (2024) findings. Both types of institutions endorse blended teaching, citing benefits like flexibility and enhanced interaction (Wai & Seng, 2015; Rasheed, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Challenges mentioned include student supervision issues, particularly in online components, echoing previous discussions (Ocak, 2011; Radovan & Kristl, 2017). Teachers in private universities express greater concern over student discipline and management, impacting learning

outcomes.

Regarding technical support for blended learning, there is limited research distinguishing between private and public universities. This study found notable differences: private university students praised the diversity and modernity of resources, while public university students criticized outdated video content. This disparity is attributed to the greater financial freedom and higher tuition fees of private universities, which necessitate better software and hardware. This finding contrasts with studies focused solely on higher education institutions (Cuesta Medina, 2018; Altay & Altay, 2019), showing that private universities can offer better flexibility and support. Teachers from both types of universities generally agree with students on technical support. Public university teachers reported adequate resources, whereas private university teachers noted that additional online courses from top universities enhance learning. This finding contrasts with Ding's (2021) suggestion that teachers need more training. The teachers in this study are capable of handling current technological aspects, supporting Sandanayake's (2019) emphasis on the need for up-to-date online resources.

The third dimension concerns the effectiveness of blended learning. Interviews with students from both private and public universities affirmed its positive outcomes. Four students reported improved grades, and two private university students noted increased abilities and confidence, aligning with previous research (Poon, 2013; Broadbent, 2017). Teachers primarily highlighted the advantages of blended learning. One private university teacher observed that students value face-to-face learning more and that teacher-student interaction has increased, contrasting with Cao et al.'s (2024) findings on negative student attitudes. This indicates that there are differences between classes, and it is likely that this particular teacher's effective methods led to students actively engaging with the teacher. The effective implementation of blended learning by teachers is an essential factor that should not be overlooked.

Additionally, we posed an extra question to the heads of EFL programs at public and private universities, comparing blended learning with traditional learning from a macro and management perspective. Both heads stated that blended learning has brought positive changes in terms of grades and student abilities compared to traditional learning. The public university head focused more on future challenges, while the private university head emphasized current adjustments, actively seeking feedback from teachers and students, continuously optimizing the online learning component, and increasing investment to fully leverage the advantages of blended learning. This also reflects the characteristics and development directions of public and private universities, consistent with the comparisons made by many scholars (Naidu & Derani, 2016; Babacan & Ceviz, 2020) regarding the characteristics and development directions of public and private universities.

Conclusion

This study examined attitudes and perceptions of blended learning among students and teachers at a public and a private university. Both groups acknowledged benefits such as improved student performance, diverse teaching methods, and increased engagement. However, public university students found online content outdated, whereas private universities quickly met students' needs with the latest materials. Blended learning effectively engages private university students with weaker foundational skills and less interest in EFL

learning. Teacher supervision helps address poor self-discipline among these students, fostering good study habits. Public university students generally have better study habits, making increased supervision particularly beneficial for private university students. Interviews with EFL heads revealed that private universities focus more on current developments and adjustments, while public universities look towards future trends. With greater flexibility in finances and curriculum design, private universities can promptly address and resolve issues, achieving better EFL learning outcomes and maximizing the advantages of blended learning.

Recommendations

Given the financial flexibility and ability to quickly adapt, private universities are particularly well-suited for blended learning. Private universities should continue to invest in the latest learning technologies and diverse content to keep students engaged. Strengthening teacher supervision and support systems can address students' self-discipline issues, fostering better study habits. Additionally, regular feedback mechanisms should be implemented to continuously improve the blended learning experience. By leveraging these advantages, private universities can maximize the benefits of blended learning, enhancing EFL learning outcomes and overall student engagement.

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