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Exploring Blended Courses: A Case Study of EFL Instruction in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the implementation of blended learning in higher education through a selective course "Readings from Selected English Journals." The study investigates the development of an online platform for the course, the adaptation of the teaching syllabus to suit blended course dynamics, student and teacher's feedback on the effectiveness of online resources and in-class interactions. In spite of some constraints in the syllabus design, differentiated instruction could be provided within the class based on students' learning interests and motivations. Also, student and teacher expressed positive attitudes towards blended learning, suggesting a promising shift towards digital tools in education. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research to explore diverse course offerings and refine teaching practices. This is to meet students' evolving needs in blended learning environments.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, blended learning, EFL

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Introduction

Blended courses have undergone diverse iterations during the pandemic, encompassing fully online instruction, partial online instruction for both teachers and students, and fully offline instruction. With the rapid advancement of online technology and the insights gained from the pandemic's shift to purely online teaching, there has been a growing recognition of the irreplaceable value of face-to-face classroom interaction. Consequently, in the post-pandemic era, blended courses that primarily utilize offline classrooms as the major teaching venue, while integrating online resources and platform to overcome temporal and spatial constraints, are poised to emerge as a preferred option for some university educators. This study seeks to investigate the design of a feasible syllabus and gauge student and teacher's perceptions of blended course resources and platform, employing differentiated instruction as a framework. The objective is to provide relevant empirical evidence to enrich the discourse on blended learning and differentiated instruction concepts.

Literature Review

Blended learning refers to the phenomenon where students engage in both online and face-to-face learning activities (Horn & Staker, 2015). Its essence lies in three aspects: 1) online learning, where students can control the time, place, path, or pace of their learning autonomously; 2) at least some of the students' learning activities take place in physical spaces such as classrooms; 3) online and face-to-face learning combine to form an integrated course. This learning method not only better reflects the student-centered learning process and is connected with language learning self-construction characteristics, but also fully retains the advantages of traditional classrooms in emotional communication and teacher-led instruction, making it suitable for language learners (He, 2016).

Blended learning is welcomed by teachers in various disciplines, including nursing, engineering, mathematics, physiotherapy, and others. In language teaching, blended learning is increasingly gaining attention from teachers due to its support for student-centered learning and activation of students' subjective initiative. Li (2019) conducted a literature review of articles on blended learning in SSCI core journals from 2000 to 2019, with a total of 60 articles in the field of language teaching, of which 56 were published from 2010 to 2019, indicating the increasing popularity of blended learning. In the context of blended learning, actively researching and practicing intelli-

gent foreign language teaching is necessary to cultivate international talents adapted to the new pattern of "dual circulation" development and to serve the construction of a talent-strong country (Zhong, 2021).

Education is about promoting the development of each student. How to understand and unleash the potential of each student, so that everyone can receive suitable learning and development conditions in school, is the most significant issue in education today. Differentiated instruction is based on this view of learning, aiming to promote the personalized development of students. This is done while ensuring that all students achieve the national curriculum goals.

As part of differentiated instruction, students are divided into several groups based on criteria such as ability, performance, or intelligence. The teacher instructs different groups according to different academic achievement levels. Differentiated instruction (DI) is divided into explicit and implicit differentiated instruction. Explicit differentiated instruction refers to the reorganization of teaching objectives into different levels based on a relatively fair and just standard, forming one (or several) teaching classes for teaching; implicit differentiated instruction, also known as within-class grouping, refers to the internal grouping of teaching objectives in a class depending on differences in academic foundation, cognitive ability, emotional inclination, etc., without explicit grouping, but rather a personalized teaching mode adopted by teachers after understanding the differences among students (Guo, 2013). Research on differentiated instruction began in the late 1940s and has experienced ups and downs before rapidly developing and gaining popularity over the years and continuously evolving. Scholars have studied DI in classrooms from various perspectives, covering both special needs populations (such as children with disabilities) and general classrooms (Strogilos et al., 2020).

In the Chinese mainland, Liu (2002) proposed the "Six-Step Model Strategy" for differentiated instruction teaching, including benchmark orientation, diagnostic compensation, synchronous teaching, differentiated training, feedback adjustment, and integrated evaluation; Xie(2011) studied the structure of college students' online learning self-efficacy, influencing factors, and training strategies, and developed a scale based on self-efficacy, self-effort, environmental mastery, and behavioral control; Dai(2021) constructed a design model for teaching junior high school information technology courses based on differentiated instruction, proposing five dimensions of student grouping, teaching objectives grouping, teaching process grouping, exercise grouping, and evaluation grouping.

Yang and Liu (2021) conducted a systematic review of literature from 2000 to 2020, analyzing the evaluation dimensions of differentiated instruction and teaching effectiveness. They found that in terms of conclusion analysis, Chinese research had positive conclusions, while foreign research had both positive and negative conclusions; in terms of evaluation dimensions, Chinese research focused more on academic performance, while foreign research combined academic performance with social interaction. Liu (2022) explored the elements and relationships of multi-level teaching design, designed targeted learning content based on differential analysis of learning, stratified learning objectives, and clarified learning activity procedures and classroom support strategies, and constructed in a within-class differentiated instruction teaching plan that is operable and achievable. Fang and Liu (2023) conducted interviews with students and teachers who had experienced differentiated instruction in middle schools and coded the results. They found that under differentiated instruction, students' self-awareness development had both positive and negative aspects, with negative effects related to differentiated instruction characteristics and poor implementation strategies.

While extensive research has explored the benefits of blended learning and differentiated instruction in various educational contexts, there is still a lack of understanding of how these two pedagogical approaches can be integrated effectively, particularly in post-pandemic higher education settings. Most of the existing studies on blended learning have focused on its application in broader disciplines such as engineering, mathematics, and healthcare, with less attention paid to its implementation in language learning and the nuanced effects of differentiated instruction within this domain. Additionally, while some studies address the importance of student-centred learning and online engagement, there is limited empirical evidence on how differentiated instruction can be specifically tailored to enhance student learning in blended courses that use face-to-face interactions as the primary teaching mode, supplemented by online resources.

Method

This study answers the following questions:

(1) What is the current syllabus for an offline EFL course in a blended setting, and how would it be adapted?

(2) What are student and teacher's perceptions and effectiveness of blended learning in university EFL courses?

(3) How can blended courses provide differentiated instruction?

In support of the author's university-based blended course project, an online platform, accessible at www.bnuzh.yuketang.cn was established specifically for the course titled 'Readings from Selected English Journals.' The author meticulously adapted the instructional design to suit blended learning dynamics, while ensuring alignment with established pedagogical principles.

The author created video recordings and quizzes, categorizing them into four segments in Graph1. The first segment comprises explanations of passage A discussed in class, pertinent to the final examination. The second segment includes quizzes related to passage A. The third part features supplementary reading passage B accompanied by video analyses and passage C in text version, enabling students to further explore texts based on their individual English proficiency and interests, thereby encouraging self-motivated learning. In this part, one or two passages related to each week's topic are provided online, allowing students to challenge themselves voluntarily. Lastly, quizzes based on supplementary passage B are provided. Since the weekly topics are predetermined, students can access useful background information and vocabulary resources by learning the first passage in class, which helps them to more easily read the related passages. As a result, the overall difficulty of the extensive reading tasks is reduced.

Table 1

Online Resources and Data on the Platform

Segments	Main Tasks	Description
Segment 1	Passage A Explanation video	Video content covering material discussed in class, important for the final examination and students choose to watch them voluntarily
Segment 2	Quizzes on Passage A	Quizzes related to the material covered in Passage A
Segment 3	Supplementary Reading (B/C)	Additional readings and video analyses provided for self-directed learning
Segment 4	Quizzes on Supplementary Passage B	Quizzes based on supplementary readings

To elucidate from a different angle, table1 shows the distinct roles and phases, both the teacher's and student's responsibilities span across several stages. Before class, the teacher prepares videos and quizzes for both in-class and supplementary readings. During class, the teacher uses the online platform to facilitate discussions and collect quiz result. After class, the teacher collects data on students' engagement with extra reading and quiz completion, rewarding those who participate with a few additional marks. From the students' perspective, the platform is used during class for quizzes and participation in two discussions. After class, students can access online resources for passage B and C, watch supplementary videos, completing quizzes for passage B, and review the video of passage A explained in class.

Table 2

Teacher's and Student's Actions Based on Roles and Phases

Phase	Teacher's action	Student's action
Before Class	-Prepare passage A, B, C; -Create videos for passage A and B; -Design quizzes for passage A and B	None
During Class	-Facilitate discussions using the online platform -Organize Passage A quizzes, review and comment on some answers	-Participate in discussions through the online platform -Complete passage A quizzes -Listen to real-time feedback
After Class	-Collect data on students' engagement with extra readings and quiz completion -Reward participation with additional marks	-Access online resources (Passage B video; Passage C reading) -Complete quizzes for Passage B -Review videos of Passage A explained in class

The major functions of the online platform include providing videos, quizzes and discussion for both in-class and after-class use. Data were collected on video watching duration, quizzes completion and discussion answering. At the end of the second semester, an anonymous, self-created questionnaire was distributed to gather detailed student feedback on their learning experiences and perceptions. Additionally,

the author reflected on the students' in-class interaction behaviours and her personal feelings as a teacher at the conclusion of each semester.

Findings

To address the first question regarding the teaching syllabus for the course 'Readings from Selected English Journals', the instructor's ability to make significant adjustments is limited if the overarching syllabus framework does not recognize the online component as an integral part of the offline curriculum. The blended learning approach aimed to allocate 20%-50% of teaching time for students to determine their preferred timing and location for course engagement. However, the current pedagogical guidelines mandate that all teaching hours take place in a physical classroom. Consequently, as table2 demonstrates, students were required to attend classroom sessions punctually each week to earn attendance credit (5%) throughout the semester. Process evaluation encompassed passage A online quizzes and writing tasks, contributing to 25% of the overall assessment. Class performance (10%) was evaluated based on in-class interaction while engagement with passage B/C video watching and passage B quizzes answering could earn a bonus for this part. The final examination, centered on passages A discussed in class, accounted for 60% of the total grade.

Table 3

Syllabus for the Course

Proportion	Content
5%	Attendance
25%	Passage A quizzes results and writing tasks performance
10%	In-class interaction and engagement based on discussion; Extra passage reading, video watching and quizzes answering
60%	Final written exam, about 70% stemmed from Passage A

To answer the second question from student's perspective, data were collected on students' use of online resources and interactions through the platform, as well as through a questionnaire. Regarding the online platform data, over two semesters,

17 and 15 hours of video content explaining passage A and B were provided to 74 and 79 students, respectively. Online interaction during class sessions totaled 1502 and 1267 instances, involving verbal prompts from the teacher and students responding by typing their answers on their mobile phone and submitting them through the online platform. Typically, the instructor posted two small discussion questions each week to facilitate these interactions. Also, an anonymous questionnaire was administered during the second semester, with 53 students responding. Overall satisfaction with the course was high, with an aggregate satisfaction rate of 88.68%, comprising 41.51% satisfied and 47.16% very satisfied respondents. Additionally, 58.69% of participants advocated for online discussions retention, while 58.49% found online explanations of supplementary reading material beneficial. Notably, 98.11% of respondents acknowledged that online answering during in-class sessions enhanced student engagement and participation, with 100% expressing appreciation for online explanations of in-class readings in preparation for the final examination.

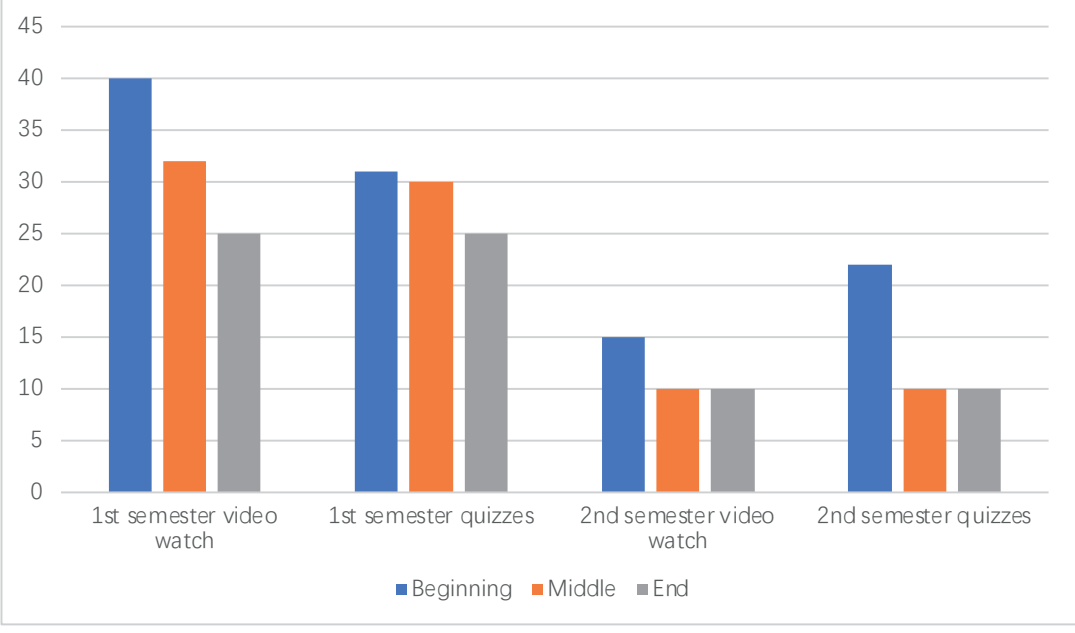
In answering the second question based on the teacher's class observation, the author identified two major findings. First, quiz correction became significantly more efficient with the use of online platforms, particularly for quizzes involving objective questions and short subjective responses. This method streamlined the grading process, especially when conducted objective and short subjective questions. Second, the use of online platforms during real-time discussions led to increased student participation and engagement. Online platform's ability to transcend the limitation of traditional, offline classrooms – where only a few students typically have the opportunity to share their ideas – enabled a greater number of students to contribute. For instance, 38 out of 74 students participated in sharing their thoughts on a discussion about food, while in the other semester, 37 out of 79 responded to a question related to their personal understanding of sleep. These examples align with the overall online platform data, indicating that in-class interaction instances reached 1502 and 1267 respectively. When divided across 16 teaching weeks in one semester, this equates to an average of 80-90 interactions per 1.5-hour class. This data suggests that approximately half of the students in this course engaged in two interactive activities during each offline class.

In addressing the third question regarding the implementation of DI, student participation in watching supplementary videos and completing quizzes exhibited a varied trend between semesters and a

declining trend within both semesters (as shown in Graph2). In the first semester's class of 74 students, approximately 40 students watched the videos and 31 completed the quizzes at the beginning of the course. By the middle to the end of the semester, around 32 students were watching videos, and 30 were completing quizzes, which further declined to 25 students for both activities by the end. In the next semester with 79 students, only 15 students watched the videos and 22 completed quizzes at the beginning. By the middle to the end of the semester, this decreased to approximately 10 students for both video-watching and quiz completion.

Figure

DI implementation in Two Semesters



Discussion

In answering the first question on adapting the teaching syllabus, it would be beneficial to reduce the weight of the final exam portion. This would enable instructors to allocate an increased proportion to process-based performance. Such an adjustment would allow teachers to reward students who actively and consistently

participate in class, as high scores on final exams do not always reflect genuine engagement through the course. Emphasizing process performance would enable teachers to monitor students' progress over the semester, rather than solely focusing on exam results. Additionally, this approach would encourage students to focus on their relative improvement rather than on the absolute performance of their final score. Students who start at a lower proficiency level but put in more effort should be rewarded more during process than those who have stronger English skills but do not invest much effort.

The discussion of the second question, concerning perceptions of the blended course will refer to Table1 and will be divided by roles and phases. First is student's in-class experience. Concerning students' feedback on in-class online interaction and online materials, responses have been overwhelmingly positive. Students are receptive to embracing these digital tools, and for "digitally indigenous" youngsters, transitioning to blended learning requires minimal effort. Additionally, students are more engaged when their answers are read or commented on by the lecturer.

Second is the students' after-class experience. The fact that all students found that the illustration video for passage A useful suggests that the in-class real-time explanation of passage A is not sufficient. By the end of the semester, students preferred to watch the video again for review rather than relying solely on their notes. This highlights the need for repeatable resources, as one-time, non-repeatable explanations may not be as effective as resources that students can revisit. In the digital age, providing such resources is not difficult to achieve. As for Passage B/C, an interesting observation emerged from the data on video watching and quiz completion. At the beginning of the second semester, fewer students watched the video than those who completed the quizzes for supplementary reading, which deviated from the teacher's original design. This result initially suggested that some students might be attempting to complete the quizzes without watching the explanatory videos. At first, this was viewed as problematic, as it indicated that students were not fully following the instructional steps. However, on further reflection, a more positive interpretation emerged: some students might be opting to read the passages independently and then take the quizzes, which aligns with the goals of differentiated instruction. This approach suggests that students engaged in self-directed learning by completing the quizzes after independently studying the material. From this data, the teacher may consider a new scenario for future study:

that some students may complete the quizzes without watching the video, representing a different type of Differentiated Instruction.

Third is the teacher's role before class. The starting point for teachers in developing a blended course lies in creating or gathering online resources. Teachers may spend a considerable amount of time and energy preparing materials and recording videos in advance. One suggestion is that teachers should prioritize materials that remain relevant over time, rather than creating limited utility recordings. Also, open online platforms, such as MOOCs, provide well-organized video content that teachers could incorporate into the course as related or suggested learning material. It is undeniable that selecting suitable online materials requites effort. However, if these resources are to be included in the evaluation process, obtaining permission from the platform to access to student data could be challenging. Therefore, it is advisable that teachers strike a balance between creating self-made materials and utilizing publicly available resources.

Fourth is the teacher's in-class role, which mainly involves administering in-class quizzes and facilitating discussions, in addition to routine lecturing. These have been reported positive primarily due to their efficiency and ability to increase participation. Traditionally, paper-based quizzes require manual correction after class, with the results reviewed in subsequent sessions. By comparison, with the shift to online platforms, objective quiz results can be instantly graded, and while subjective responses still require manual evaluation, the teacher can view all submissions in real time. This allows the teacher to review early submissions while other students are still working, enabling immediate feedback once all responses are collected. Furthermore, class participation could be enhanced by enabling more students to engage in activities such as answering questions. In traditional classrooms, only a limited number of students could participate, typically through raising their hands. In contrast, online platforms allow for wider student involvement, ensuring that more students are engaged both behaviorally and cognitively.

It is important to note, however, that the mode of participation differs between traditional and digital formats. While traditional classrooms rely on verbal responses, online platform often require written answers. In the context of this study, which focuses on a reading course, this distinction is not significant. Nevertheless, for courses emphasizing speaking skills, teachers should be mindful of the differences in student engagement when using

digital platforms.

By providing one compulsory reading, one or two extensive passages, along with explanatory videos and quizzes for Passage A and B, differentiated instruction was effectively implemented. This approach differs from rigid methods solely based on students' academic performance, emphasizing flexibility, individual interests and self-motivation. As a form of implicit differentiated instruction, the number of participating students should not be a primary concern for teachers. In this approach, the lecturer's primary role is to provide materials, while students have the autonomy to decide whether or not to engage. One observed trend was a decrease in the number of students participating in extra reading as the semester progressed, reflecting a common pattern where students tend to be more active at the beginning of a course, with some gradually disengaging. Another finding was that the class of 74 students had a higher level of participation in supplementary reading compared to the class of 79 students. This highlights the unique nature of each class, as student engagement in DI can vary despite having the same lecturer, similar teaching methods, and topics. Although the reward for in-class performance, capped at 10%, may not seem particularly motivating, some students continued to engage, driven by personal interests or preparation for exams such as the IELTS or postgraduate entrance exams.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the implementation of blended learning in higher education, particularly in the context of an EFL course, demonstrating the value of integrating online resources and platforms with face-to-face instruction. The findings suggest that blended learning can enhance student engagement and allow for more effective differentiated instruction. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from students regarding in-class online interaction and the usefulness of online resources signifies a promising shift towards embracing digital tools in education. From a pedagogical perspective, it is possible to achieve self-motivated differentiated instruction. Both the teacher and students confirmed the positive impact of the increase engagement of class interaction and students responded positively to the flexibility of online tools.

While the findings underscore the potential benefits of blending online and offline teaching modes, several limitations should be considered. This study focuses on a single course, which may limit the generalizability of the results. While

insights gained from this course are valuable, they may not fully capture the range of experiences and challenges encountered in other courses or academic disciplines. Also, students were not involved in a "before-class" phase, which is an area for potential future inclusion.

Additionally, there is a need to increase the emphasis on process-based assessment over traditional final examinations. Challenges related to the development and accessibility of online materials also emerged as considerations.

Future research endeavors could benefit from expanding the scope to include a more diverse array of EFL courses or expanding to other disciplines in the humanities. Further refinement of teaching and assessment practices will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and challenges associated with blended learning across various contexts. Such efforts will better accommodate the evolving needs of students in blended learning environments and help ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners.

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