Challenges in Promoting Learner Autonomy in Blended Learning: Perspectives from English as a Foreign Language Teachers in China

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Abstract

Blended learning is gaining popularity as a prevailing practice in higher education worldwide. This study explores the challenges faced by experienced English as a Foreign Language teachers in promoting learner autonomy within blended learning environments. Drawing from interviews and classroom observations conducted with five EFL teachers at a private university in China, the study identifies four key challenges: technological, pedagogical, cultural, and institutional. Technological challenges revolve around concerns regarding technical support, internet reliability, and hardware availability, highlighting the need for sturdy technical infrastructure and supportive mechanisms. Pedagogical challenges include designing effective blended learning activities that balance teacher-led instruction with opportunities for student autonomy, emphasizing the importance of scaffolding learning tasks, and providing adequate support for independent learning. Cultural challenges underscore the influence of cultural factors on student attitudes towards autonomy and authority in the classroom, emphasizing the

necessity for culturally responsive teaching practices. Institutional challenges highlight barriers stemming from rigid curriculum requirements, limited professional development opportunities, and a lack of administrative support, underscoring the importance of systemic support and organizational change. The findings offer valuable guidance for institutions, administrators, and EFL teachers on how to design more effective blended EFL courses. Limitations and suggestions for future studies such as larger sample size, rigorous data collection method, and longitudinal studies are provided to enhance our understanding of promoting learner autonomy in blended learning environments.

Keywords: learner autonomy, blended learning, EFL teacher, challenge

1. Introduction

1.1 Blended Learning in EFL Teaching

Blended learning (BL), a pedagogical approach that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning activities, has gained substantial attention recently in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education (Alam, Albozeidi, Al-Hawamdeh, & Ahmad, 2022; Cheng et al., 2023). The adoption of BL has been driven by various factors, including advancements in educational technology, the increasing demand for English proficiency, and the need to accommodate diverse learning styles and preferences among students (Ashraf, Mollah, Perveen, Shabnam, & Nahar, 2022). Moreover, with the widespread availability of computers, tablets, and smartphones, as well as the proliferation of online platforms and learning management systems (LMS), educators have increasingly turned to BL as a means to leverage technology in their teaching practices (Anthony et al., 2022; Lu, 2022; Zhu, Berri, & Zhang, 2021). Previous studies mostly showed the advantages of BL in facilitating EFL teaching (Jiang, Chen, Lu, & Wang, 2021; Mohamed, 2022; Sheerah, 2020) and promoting English language proficiencies among EFL learners (Rahimzadeh & Gilakjani, 2022; Yang & Kuo, 2021). However, the perceptions of the BL technology used in the EFL instructions have been different. Some studies showed the positive attitude and perceptions among teachers and students toward BL in the EFL teaching process (Fisher et al., 2021; Rankin, 2022; Taghizadeh & Hajhosseini, 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Yang & Kuo, 2021), whereas others reported negative perceptions on the implementation of BL in EFL teaching (Blieck et al., 2019; Le, Allen, & Johnson 2022; Zhu et al., 2021).

BL aligns with the goals of English teaching reforms by providing opportunities for interactive and student-centred learning experiences that foster critical thinking, communication skills, and digital literacy (Yang & Kuo, 2021). The Chinese government has emphasized the integration of technology into education through policies such as the "Internet Plus Actions" since 2015. This year, the "Digital Education Cooperation in 2024" further promoted the use of BL, especially in higher education EFL programmes (Li, 2022; Wan, 2023). However, with a vast and diverse student population spread across urban and rural areas, China, as the world's largest EFL learner population, faces unique challenges in providing quality blended EFL instruction to students (Li, 2018). When adapting to the new BL paradigm, EFL teachers

encounter a range of obstacles. Therefore, it is crucial to do research that aims to comprehend the challenges related to BL in this specific context. This research is meaningful for shaping policy, guiding new teaching pedagogy, and enhancing the EFL proficiency of Chinese EFL learners.

1.2 Promoting Learner Autonomy in Blended Learning Model

Learner autonomy (LA) is the capacity of students to take charge of their education, choose their learning objectives and approaches, and actively participate in self-directed learning activities (Ayesha, 2020). In blended EFL teaching, students have more freedom and access to a variety of online resources and learning tools. To maximize the teaching effect of the BL model, it is essential to promote students' LA throughout the BL process (Aalinezhad, Salehan, & Noroozi 2021; Ayesha, 2020).

BL environments can stimulate students' sense of ownership and investment in their studies by granting them greater autonomy over their learning process. Padilla Rodriguez & Armellini (2021) have demonstrated that students are more likely to be motivated and engaged in the learning process when they are provided with the opportunity to make decisions regarding the content, timing, and method of their education. Additionally, BL enables learners to customize and adapt their learning experiences to their preferences (Aalinezhad et al., 2021; Xie, Chu, Hwang, & Wang, 2019). Teachers can adapt instruction to accommodate the unique learning styles, interests, and requirements of students by incorporating LA into the BL model. This personalized approach improves learning outcomes by increasing the relevance and efficacy of instruction (Ashraf et al., 2022). In the rapidly changing world, it is imperative to cultivate lifelong learning skills, including the capacity to learn independently and adapt to new challenges. By fostering LA, BL equips students with the skills and mindset necessary for lifelong learning (Blaschke, 2021; Jiao, 2018). They can learn how to set goals, manage their time effectively, seek out resources, and monitor their progress, all of which are valuable skills for success in both academic and professional contexts. Besides, the development of LA is a prerequisite for the cultivation of critical thinking and metacognitive skills (Chen, 2022; Liu et al., 2022). BL environments provide opportunities for students to engage in metacognitive activities, such as self-assessment, goal-setting, and problem-solving, which are essential for deepening language comprehension and promoting higher-order thinking skills (Bolandifar, 2017).

Promoting LA in BL is essential for optimizing the capacity of technology-enhanced instruction, empowering students to develop a lifelong learning mindset, and equipping them for success in the digital era (Kim & Yoon, 2021). However, in practice, there also occur some problems in the BL implementation, such as heavy workload for EFL teachers, ineffective use of BL, and lack of digital literacy required by BL, etc (Le et al., 2022). Thus, by fostering a culture that emphasizes independence and self-directed learning, EFL teachers may create more dynamic, engaging, and efficient BL environments that cater to the diverse requirements and capacities of contemporary EFL students.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to investigate the experiences and perspectives of EFL teachers at a private university concerning the challenges they encounter in promoting LA in the BL environments. It seeks to identify the factors that impede the effective implementation of LA principles and to recommend strategies and best practices to address these challenges. This will contribute to the development of more effective pedagogical approaches and support mechanisms for EFL instructors in China.

1.4 Research Question

What are the specific challenges faced by EFL instructors in China when attempting to promote LA in the BL environment?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Blended Learning (BL) and Learner Autonomy (LA) in EFL Contexts

BL refers to the combination of traditional face-to-face teaching and online instruction or resources, aiming to optimize the learning effect by maximizing the advantages of both modes of learning (Padilla Rodriguez & Armellini, 2021). The BL model recognizes the need to promote LA, which refers to the ability of learners to autonomously manage their learning process and make informed decisions. LA is achieved by a sequence of unconscious or spontaneous learning activities, rather than being influenced by external influences (Little, 2022). It has been highlighted as vital to language teaching by Ayesha (2020), Chen (2022), and Liu, Yao, Li, & Li (2022). In the BL environment, students have the potential to develop their LA because they are given much more freedom to decide their learning pace and learning content (Chen, 2022; Kim & Yoon, 2021; Pham, 2023). Recently, BL has become popular in EFL contexts to improve language learning experiences (Al-Obaydi, 2023; Liu & Deris, 2022).

Many researchers have emphasized the significance of incorporating digital technologies into conventional EFL classrooms to establish BL environments. BL offers interactive, multimodal experiences that enhance language skills, allow interaction with authentic materials, and increase learner engagement and motivation, which is crucial for the development of LA (Aalinezhad et al., 2021). Online BL platforms and activities, such as quizzes, substantially enhance academic performance (Argyriou, Benamar, & Nikolajeva, 2022). The flexibility and accessibility of BL platforms promote self-directed learning and increased autonomy in EFL contexts (Little, 2007; McKellar & Barton, 2023). Besides, BL provides self-assessment tools, encouraging critical thinking skills and ownership of learning (Bolandifar, 2017).

Despite the advantages of BL, the teacher's role is still essential for offering guidance and support (Adam, Hamid, Khatibi, & Azam, 2023; Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019). The central role of teachers in the design and facilitation of meaningful BL experiences is emphasized by many studies (Adam et al., 2023; Chen, 2022; Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019), which highlights the indispensable role of teaching presence described in CoI farmwork by Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, (1999). Therefore, Arifani, Mindari, Hidayat, & Wicaksono (2023) and

Le et al. (2022) underscore the significance of professional development and teacher training to effectively integrate technology and promote LA in EFL classrooms. In the BL model, EFL students are involved in three kinds of interaction: interaction with peers, teachers, and learning contents, which correspond to the three "presences" illustrated in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework.

2.2 Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework

Community of Inquiry (CoI) theory, developed by Garrison et al. (1999), provides a framework for BL environments and promoting LA. It consists of three core elements. Cognitive presence refers to the ability of learners to construct and confirm meaning through reflection and discourse, enhanced through inquiry-based learning, reflective exercises, and collaborative discussions. This element fosters autonomous learning and critical thinking. Social presence refers to the capacity to build interpersonal relationships, communicate intentionally, and create a sense of community. Tools like discussion forums, group projects, and online interactions enhance this presence, motivating learners to take risks and engage in self-directed learning. Teaching presence refers to the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes to achieve learning outcomes. This includes clear articulation of goals, timely feedback, and facilitation of discussions, empowering students to take control of their learning. The CoI model underscores the necessity of integration and interaction among all three components to achieve optimal learning across online and face-to-face modalities (Garrison et al., 1999; Liu & Deris, 2022). The educational or learning experience is compromised by the absence of any of the following components: learners may lack motivational support, discussions may lack depth, and learners may miss expert guidance if there is no social, or cognitive or teaching presence. According to Figure 1, the optimal learning environment is represented by the intersection of all three elements (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Zhang, 2020), and, teaching presence is believed to be the most significant and influential of the three presences of CoI in terms of students' engagement and learning performance in the BL experience (Yin & Yuan, 2022).
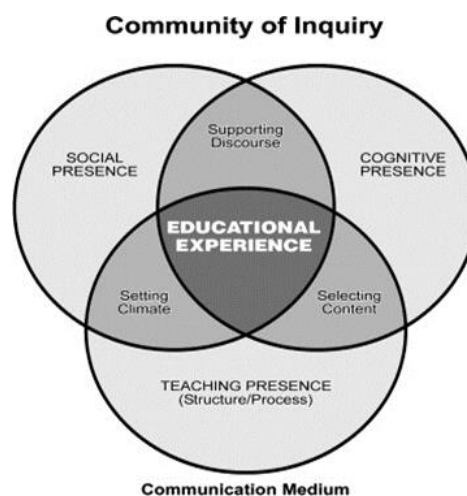

Figure 1. Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework (Garrison et al., 1999)

2.3 Challenges in Promoting LA in BL Environments

In EFL environments, BL improves learning experiences and LA, yet its implementation is difficult. Insufficient infrastructure and technology, institutional policies and support, inadequate knowledge, expertise, and investment in BL, etc. are critical barriers to implementing blended EFL learning (Le et al., 2022). Research indicates that many EFL learners cannot utilize online learning platforms and digital resources (Rianto, 2020). To help students bridge the digital divide, strong instruction is needed.

Cultural and contextual elements including language competency and social culture can affect learners' views towards BL technology and LA development (Lai, 2019; Gayatri, Sit, Chen, & Li, 2023). Learning outcomes vary with the educational culture or system. Exam-oriented cultures increase testing and limit students' communicative and critical thinking skills (Littlewood, 2007) which negatively impact cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor competencies (Yasmin, Farooq, & Shah, 2023). On the other hand, Quality-oriented cultures emphasize students' comprehensive, innovative, and practical skills rather than exam scores (Reinders & White, 2016).

The shift from traditional instructors to facilitators of autonomous learning is another barrier, and the same is true for EFL students switching from a teacher-centred, test-oriented approach to a learner-centred approach in BL (Tran, 2019). Thus, resistance from teachers among students occurs owing to fear, lack of training, or scepticism, hindering BL implementation (Alam et al., 2022; Chang, 2020; Apandi & Raman, 2020).

Time management and self-discipline are two self-regulation skills that many learners find difficult to develop, resulting in procrastination in BL situations (Alvarez, 2020; Ashraf et al., 2022; Hosseini, Ejtehadi, & Hosseini, 2020; Ren, 2021). To promote LA, teachers must select high-quality online resources (Rianto, 2020; Sriwichai, 2020) and provide meaningful, immediate feedback to students (Müller, Mildenberger, & Steingruber, 2023), which reinforces correct usage, corrects errors, and tracks progress in language learning, whereas inappropriate resources or delayed feedback in BL environments can hinder autonomy and progress.

According to the literature review, the successful implementation of BL and LA in EFL contexts necessitates the consideration of six interconnected components: pedagogical approach, technology integration, flexibility and accessibility, reflection and feedback, teacher roles, and cultural and contextual considerations. In order to effectively promote LA, teachers must navigate technology challenges, balance their dual responsibilities, and take cultural factors into account as they transition from traditional models to BL. Figure 2 illustrates these components and challenges.
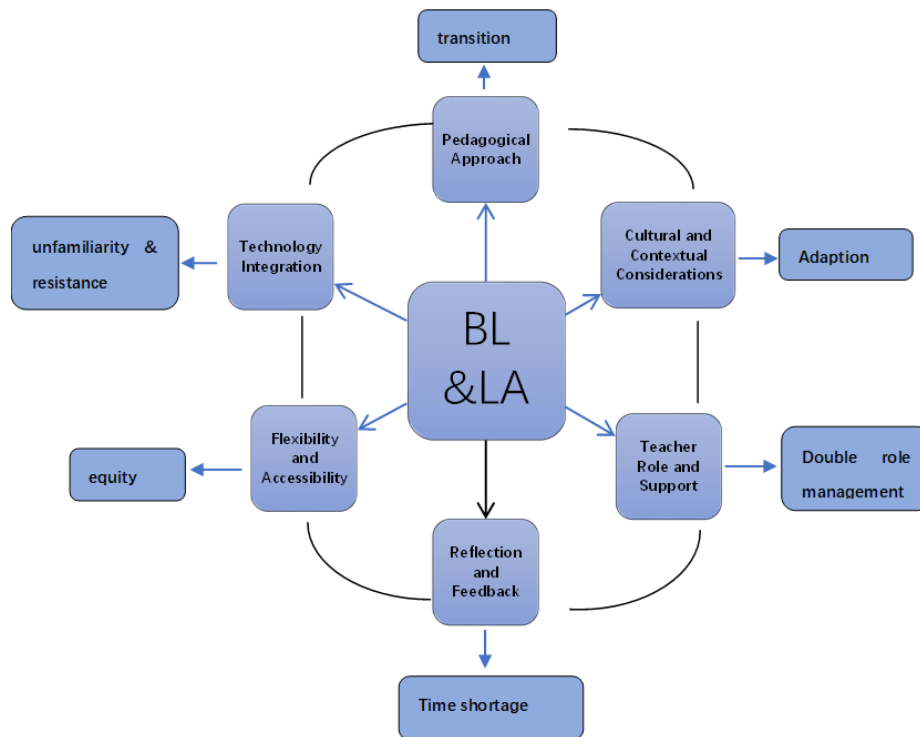
Figure 2. Components and challenges of BL and LA

Overall, past research has focused on the potential of BL to improve students' language proficiency, language learning skills, LA, and learning motivation (Bolandifar, 2017; Chen & Hwang, 2020; Shen, 2021). Most research on blended EFL learning challenges focuses on technology, institutional support, teacher and student competency, and interaction issues (García Le et al., 2022; Lai et al., 2016; Moon, 2023; Ren, 2021; Rianto, 2020), of which most are based on public universities and are rarely studied in private institutions, which face distinctive teaching environments and student demographics.

3. Method

A qualitative case study design was employed in this investigation to investigate the perspectives of the Chinese EFL teacher participants regarding the challenges associated with promoting LA in the BL model. It was an in-depth description and analysis of the phenomena in their natural settings, allowing the researcher to probe into the research questions and focus on a particular case (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

To explore the challenges and practices of promoting LA in BL among EFL instructors in China, the study adopts semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to collect data from the participants. Through in-depth interviews and observations, the study aimed to gain insights into the participants' experiences, perspectives, and practices related to promoting LA in BL

environments.

During the interview phase, participants were asked open-ended questions to explore their views on the challenges they encountered in promoting LA, together with the strategies they employed to address these challenges. The interviews delved into participants' experiences with implementing BL, their use of technology in the classroom, and their perceptions of student engagement and autonomy. The interview adopted the interview protocol, of having the questions validated by the experts in this field. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to observe how participants integrate technology, foster LA, and manage classroom dynamics in their BL environments.

Following the data collection, thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview transcripts and observational notes. The thematic analysis involved coding the data, grouping similar codes into themes, and interpreting the findings about the research aim and objectives. Through the systematic analysis, the study aimed to uncover the challenges and practices of promoting LA in BL among EFL instructors in China, providing valuable insights for theory and practice in language education.

4. Findings and Discussion

This study investigated the challenges of promoting LA in the BL environment from the perspectives of EFL teachers at a private university in Xi'an, China. The data analysis indicated that EFL teacher participants encountered common challenges when implementing blended English learning in a private university. The themes covered the challenges of technological, pedagogical, cultural, and institutional aspects, which are summarized below.

4.1 Technological Challenges

Three out of five participants showed their challenges in figuring out the technical issues, such as the unfamiliarity of the online platform and being unable to access it and utilize other digital resources effectively during the BL practice. This situation deteriorated due to limited technical support. One of the comments went like this:

> *I have to learn new techniques and figure out every technical problem myself, because there is no specific training on the issue. It's quite ironical that my focus on EFL teaching has switched to technical issues instead of English teaching.*
>
> *(T1, Interview)*

Two other teachers also struggled with the new educational technology. They were required to update their EFL teaching methods to include BL but lacked systematic training on the necessary technology. Gradually, they developed negative emotions about the blended EFL model.

Internet reliability was deemed as another challenge of BL. Participants described their teaching experience with unstable and unreliable Internet connections, which interrupted online teaching and student-teacher interaction. Internet connectivity concerns such as poor

loading times for online resources, buffering during video sessions, and occasional disruptions in learning platforms were reported. Concerning these problems, T2 stated that:

> *The poor internet connection wastes precious time during the class...some students took advantage of this and found excuses for their absence from the class...*

Besides, there were concerns about the availability of hardware devices for both teachers and their students. They noted the importance of having access to computers or tablets to facilitate the BL activities and displayed the fact that the shortage of personal computers in the workplace made it difficult to complete some exercises online. It was explained by T3 that:

> *In the BL model, a lot of work has to be carried out online, but the number of shared computers at the office is not enough, normally four teachers with two or three computers, even this, not all the computers are in a good state, and some are too old to be used...*

Teacher 4 confirmed this in the interview by saying:

> *The computers in my office are a kind of decoration...some computers have been used for over ten years, which are much too slow to function…I have to bring my personal computer to the office, but it's too inconvenient and troublesome to carry it back and forth...*

Two participants complained of the trouble of bringing their home computer to the workplace because they had to share the device with family members at home, which hindered their motivation to carry out and participate in online learning activities.

Drawing from the observations made during the face-to-face sessions, the researcher noticed the unstable internet connection and the EFL teachers' inability to handle the sudden technological problems, which have become common excuses for students' justification for their absence or underperformance in the online practice of their BL.

These findings are consistent with those of Le et al. (2022), in which a lack of technical support and inadequate infrastructure are stressed as substantial obstacles for EFL instructors. While BL is meant to improve language teaching, the participants in our research doubted its effectiveness. Similar findings indicate the existence of widespread technological issues which disrupted BL activity, irrespective of geographical location. These technological challenges highlight the need for better infrastructure and assistance in integrated learning settings.

Technical issues and unfamiliarity with digital tools make it hard to establish the social presence needed for effective BL. This lack of social presence limits communication and engagement between EFL teachers and students (Garrison et al., 1999), leading to students' feelings of isolation and lower motivation, which has a detrimental effect on students' learning experience and outcomes. As suggested by previous studies (Arifani et al., 2023; Lai et al., 2016; Le et al., 2022; Rianto, 2020), to confront these obstacles, institutions should provide continuous technical training and support for teachers to equip themselves for the BL model. Besides, it is essential to guarantee consistent internet connections and provide access to

essential hardware and software (Jie and Sunze, 2023). Additionally, user-friendly, adaptable online platforms are required to enhance the integration of technology into EFL teaching and learning activities.

4.2 Pedagogical Challenges

Pedagogical challenges in this context were the diverse difficulties and obstacles encountered by EFL teachers in proficiently teaching English to non-native speakers. It encompassed the problems that occurred during the whole language teaching process, such as developing integrated learning activities and effective assessments, tailoring the curriculum to meet varying levels of students' proficiency and preferences, fostering proficiency and language skills, ensuring sustained interest, managing resource allocation, offering helpful guidance and prompt feedback, and handling classroom dynamics.

The EFL teachers in the interview exhibited their challenges in designing effective BL activities that balance teacher-led instruction with opportunities for student autonomy. T4 mentioned that:

> ...Time is very limited during the class, so it's difficult to combine BL activities with previous teacher-centred instruction...I find it hard to finish the syllabus if there are more students participating...

Because of this challenge and extra work brought about by the BL model, four out of five EFL teachers expressed their reluctance to carry out BL activities at first. This corresponds to the fact that the implementation of BL and LA is unsatisfactory because there is a contradiction between the positive report of EFL teachers on the role of LA and BL in the EFL teaching process and the inefficient implementation of them (Alam et al., 2022; Chang, 2020). It illustrated the difficulty in promoting LA and BL in daily EFL teaching practice.

Meanwhile, teachers showed their concerns about maintaining student engagement and motivation in blended English learning, echoing the findings of Le et al. (2022) and Apandi & Raman (2020). However, the current study differed in that the participants agreed that students perform better in blended activities during class time in the presence of their EFL instructors. This indicates students' preference for dealing with online BL content with teacher presence, which stresses the important role of teachers in the BL model (Yin & Yuan, 2022). It is of note that all the participants revealed challenges in maintaining students' engagement and motivation after class during self-regulated learning in the BL environment, which is different from previous findings indicating students' overall enhancement in LA and self-directed learning behaviours in the BL model (Aalinezhad et al., 2021; McKellar & Barton (2023). The reason provided was that most students were reluctant to use their spare time to deal with BL activities. Teacher 1 explained that,

> My students told me they had a rather busy schedule after class, and they could not fulfil all the blended tasks if they were to deal with other activities at the same time...they felt stressed and exhausted...

Facing this problem, some teachers felt at a loss to provide any countermeasures. During three out of the five observation sessions, researchers noticed the monotonous routine procedures in

the blended English classroom, in which the online elements of BL only took a very minor part of a normal English class. Some were only taken as assignment tools by EFL teachers and given as homework for extra practice after class. This is different from previous findings (Al-Obaydi, 2023; Liu & Deris, 2022) that present the enriched teaching and learning experience among EFF teachers and students. It is caused by the overall teachers' insufficient knowledge related to the BL pedagogy, leading to the ill practice of BL procedures at the private universities, and thus a call for systematic professional training on the BL approach is needed, which echoes the previous studies (Arifani et al., 2023; Le et al., 2022).

Moreover, teacher participants also reported difficulties in gathering and guaranteeing the quality of EFL online learning materials in the blended English learning environment. They revealed their difficulty in searching for related and qualified materials and then gaining access to them. Teacher 4 stated that:

> *I have to prepare the online guidelines and BL materials for my students, which takes me so much time, such as searching for the proper materials, gaining access to downloading them, integrating these materials into the online course content, etc…*

This corresponds to the previous findings of Sriwichai (2020) and Rianto (2020) who indicated the essential role of online BL resources in promoting LA among EFL learners. Therefore, the materials need to be carefully selected, organized, and trimmed by EFL teachers.

Participants also described the challenge of providing timely feedback and support for EFL learners' online learning, which supports the findings (Le et al., 2022; Müller et al., 2023). These findings indicate that online BL sessions face common obstacles regardless of regional differences. There were 40 students for an average English class at this private university, and each teacher taught several courses at the same time, making timely feedback and support very difficult. Teacher 5 stated that:

> *Because the LMS automatically marks multiple-choice, matching, and true/false questions and gives students immediate feedback, I always assign them online to save time...subjective questions requiring students' independent thinking and diversified understandings demand too much time to answer.*

Other teachers also echoed this point complaining that they were overwhelmed by various work in the BL environment, such as designing the blended syllabus for the course, learning extra knowledge to deal with the new teaching mode, searching for related materials for online content, and the different grade sheets to record students' grades for their online work.

The class observations revealed some variations in implementing BL activities, with two teachers successfully integrating blended technology to facilitate active learning and promoting LA, while the other three struggled to effectively scaffold learning activities and manage student participation. But there was one thing in common and it was that most teacher participants used the functions of LMS or BL as tools to check attendance, launch questionaries, or select students to answer questions, which is contrary to the findings of Liu & Deris (2022).

This indicates the great potential of BL in organizing various interactive activities to establish a social presence among EFL learners. In this study, the teaching atmosphere improved when most students participated in LMS-facilitated BL activities indicating that more efforts to explore the BL approach are needed. However, the completion rate of after-class online BL tasks was unsatisfactory. Sometimes around half of the students failed to submit online assignments before class, so teachers had to repeat the topic face-to-face to keep learning going. This phenomenon illustrates the low motivation and inferior English proficiency among the university students here, which supports Argyriou et al. (2022) results that online assignment completion states, especially quiz results, predict final test performance. That is to say, the better the assignment completion, the higher marks students may probably get in the final exams.

Above all, EFL teachers revealed the great difficulties in balancing diverse student needs when designing blended EFL learning activities in terms of their different English proficiency. For example, T 5 commented that,

> *It's difficult to design blended EFL learning materials and activities catering to each student's needs. Students with higher English proficiency find some tasks boring and meaningless, whereas students with lower English proficiency feel the tasks are beneficial in improving their language skills.*

This echoes the research findings of Sriwichai (2020) that students with different proficiency levels pose challenges in the BL process and necessitate guidance from teachers to create and recommend suitable materials (Rianto, 2020), which shows the facilitating role of teaching presence.

To sum up, the pedagogical issues in this study show that the challenges of private university EFL teachers are under-represented. The causes may include a lack of training in BL techniques or how to apply them to enhance EFL instruction, or being swamped with teaching and administrative duties, leaving little time to construct interesting courses or provide customized feedback. Inadequate teaching presence affects students' English learning experience and outcomes. Students may lose enthusiasm and instead, struggle to understand course content without straightforward guidance and active facilitation. Therefore, on the one hand, there is a need for institutions to invest in computers, upgrade the software and stable internet connections, and provide their maintenance. On the other hand, EFL teachers should receive comprehensive training in BL design, online instruction, and educational technology.

4.3 Cultural Challenges

The cultural challenges in this study have to do with the large power distance between teachers and students and the collectivist culture of China, which is mainly reflected in the traditional teacher-centred, teacher-authoritative, and exam-oriented education model in this study.

First, the pervasive influence of Confucian values contributes to the development of EFL students' perspectives on autonomy and authority. On the one hand, teachers should establish a sense of authority among students and adapt their teaching methods to foster respect for authority. On the other hand, they must encourage students to exercise critical thinking and

take responsibility for their learning while retaining the structure of classroom hierarchy. Teacher 3 expressed that,

> *In the BL model, I have to encourage students to take part in activities during the class. Although I tried very hard to get closer to students, they still showed nervousness and shyness talking to me…During the break, I sometimes choose to stay in the classroom to chat with students and to establish rapport with them, but few students came to me asking for help…*

Other teachers reported that teachers and students were usually distant, making deep communication difficult. EFL teachers were regarded as authoritative in English classes, and most EFL students believe they must learn from their English teachers and follow their advice. It supports the earlier finding of Gayatri et al. (2023) that EFL learners in Indonesia were highly dependent on teachers' clear instruction on learning content, including what is expected and how to achieve it. The similar findings of the two studies indicate the two countries may share common cultural similarities in the characteristics of the EFL students.

Over the five class observations, teachers dominated the class, leaving little opportunity for EFL students to speak or discuss. During those student-led activities, some students showed indifference and were distracted most of the time. Some students were hesitant to raise questions or participate actively in class discussions. It reveals that the high teacher-dependency culture in China impairs students' autonomous learning and accountability for their EFL learning. Many students at this university are still unable to identify their unique learning strategies, although BL is supposed to assist them in establishing their learning objectives and learning plans.

Because of the long-term exam-oriented culture, students were busy preparing for examinations, rendering BL courses only a form catering to school requirements. In China, college EFL education is heavily influenced by the need to perform well on standardized tests like the College English Test and Test for English Majors, which are English proficiency tests for non-English and English majors respectively. Students' focus on test preparation which prioritizes memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules over communicative competence and critical thinking skills, such as interactive discussions and problem-solving tasks, leading to students' inactive performance and even indifference towards BL activities. This aligns with Yasmin et al. (2023), suggesting the need to modify the current exam-oriented educational system.

Unlike other research, this study found considerable societal and parental expectations of students to achieve in tests at the cost of autonomous learning and language skills. Due to external pressure, EFL students prioritized rote study and test-taking over BL activities that foster LA and language usage in different contexts, diminishing cognitive presence. Hence, students accustomed to an exam-oriented approach may have challenges participating in the communicative activities provided in the BL model, which are essential for fostering autonomy in language learning (Reinders & White, 2016).

Therefore, the cultural challenges such as the profound teacher-centred and exam-oriented

educational philosophy, and the hierarchical classroom dynamics in China, made the transition to student-centred autonomous BL even more tough. These are detrimental factors blocking the practice of social presence in the BL model, inhibiting open and informal communication among students, making them reluctant to express personal opinions, or engaging in informal social interactions and collaborative discussions which are required in cognitive presence. Therefore, teachers must be aware of the cultural differences in learning preferences and communication styles, reduce cultural barriers, and enhance LA by creating a safe, accepting, and learning environment where students feel confident and empowered to take ownership of their learning endeavours.

4.4 Institutional Challenges

EFL teachers highlighted institutional barriers that hinder their efforts to promote LA in the BL environment, such as rigid curriculum requirements, limited professional development opportunities, and lack of administrative support.

The research showed that all five EFL teachers faced institutional challenges due to rigid curricular requirements that limited their flexibility in planning and conducting BL activities. Institutional mandates or standardized curriculum frameworks always prioritized content coverage over pedagogical innovation, leaving little room for teachers to experiment with learner-centred approaches. Therefore, teachers felt constrained by predetermined learning objectives, assessment criteria, and pacing guides, which did not align with the principles of LA and inhibited teachers' ability to tailor instruction to individual student needs and interests. Additionally, the pressure to adhere to standardized tests or examinations may further restrict teachers' autonomy in designing authentic and meaningful learning experiences that promote autonomy and critical thinking skills. Teacher 3 argued that,

> *We are facing a dilemma in carrying out BL activities...more student-centred teaching slows down the teaching progress, goes against the progress requirements of the syllabus, and will be criticized and questioned by supervisors of the institution.*

Besides, EFL teachers faced challenges related to limited professional development opportunities at the university that hindered their ability to enhance their pedagogical skills and knowledge of BL strategies. The insufficient resources or professional training programs left most teachers unprepared and ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of BL. Besides, teachers lacked access to training workshops, seminars, or courses focused on the best practices of BL, technology integration, and LA principles. Without adequate support and guidance from the university, teachers can hardly implement BL strategies and promote LA successfully in their classrooms. All five teacher participants showed their helplessness and feeling of isolation in the process of seeking to innovate and improve their blended EFL teaching practice. Teacher 5 stated that,

> *We are often encouraged to reform EFL teaching, but there is no other support from the school authority, such as technical support, policy support or financial support...everything we are required we have to learn and figure out by*

ourselves...we are not motivated and feel at a loss facing the new forms of teaching...we do it to fulfil the mandatory requirement of the school, but our actual ability to deal with technology has not been improved...

EFL teachers also faced scepticism from administrators who were unwilling to fund technology infrastructure, professional development, curriculum change, and pedagogical innovation. Some interviews and observations showed that institutional regulations and procedures, such as using certain equipment to monitor teaching and learning, imposed those constraints. Instead of seeking to incorporate BL into their English instruction, EFL teachers were pushed and watched.

A lack of strong leadership, advocacy, and incentive means from administrators made it difficult for teachers to advocate for change, overcome institutional barriers, and foster a culture of collaboration and experimentation that promotes LA in BL environments. Many gave up halfway through. The institutional challenges EFL teachers confront demonstrate the need for systemic support and organizational change to promote LA in BL. Addressing rigorous curricular standards, offering enough and continuous professional development, and developing administrative support empower teachers to use BL techniques and fulfil students' different learning needs.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the challenges experienced by EFL teachers in promoting LA within BL environments in China. Four key challenges were identified: technological, pedagogical, cultural, and institutional. Technological issues involved platform familiarity, technical support, internet reliability, and hardware availability. Pedagogical challenges focused on creating effective BL activities that balance teacher-led instruction and student autonomy. Cultural challenges highlighted the influence of Confucian values and exam-oriented culture on students' attitudes towards LA and BL. Institutional challenges included rigid curriculum requirements, limited professional development, and lack of administrative support. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes robust technical infrastructure, ongoing professional development, and a culture of collaboration. EFL teachers should adopt learner-centred pedagogies, adapt teaching practices to cultural preferences, and advocate for policy changes that support pedagogical innovation and student-centred EFL learning. By embracing a holistic approach, institutions can create more inclusive and effective BL environments that empower students to develop LA.

This study is subject to two limitations, including a small sample size from a single university in China and potential subjectivity in data collection. Future research should include a larger, more diverse sample and employ rigorous data collection and analysis techniques to enhance validity and credibility. Longitudinal studies are also encouraged to examine the long-term impact of BL initiatives on LA and academic achievement.

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