

QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC VỀ KHOÁ HỌC HỖN HỢP TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

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Internet đã mở ra các hình thức học tập mới, thay thế hình thức học tập truyền thống trên lớp. Đó là học tập trực tuyến và mới đây là học tập kết hợp. Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu quan điểm của người học về một khoá học kết hợp tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu sử dụng bộ câu hỏi do Akkoyunlu và Soylu (2008b) thiết kế và xác trị. 103 sinh viên của khoá học Ngữ âm và Âm vị học theo hình thức kết hợp tham gia trả lời khảo sát bằng cách cho điểm từng tiêu chí trong bộ câu hỏi. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy nhìn chung người học thể hiện quan điểm tích cực về khoá học và đánh giá cao nhất đối với các buổi học trên lớp và thấp nhất đối với hiệu quả của trang web sử dụng cho các buổi học trực tuyến. Cuối cùng bài viết đưa ra một số gợi ý nhằm nâng cao chất lượng khóa học cũng như hướng nghiên cứu cho các đề tài tương tự.

Từ khóa: quan điểm của người học, học tập kết hợp, học tập trực tuyến, học tập truyền thống.

The advent of the Internet has opened a gateway to learning modes alternative to traditional classroom learning, namely online learning, or more recently, blended learning. This study aims at investigating learners' attitudes towards a blended learning course on Phonetics and Phonology at a university in Vietnam. A questionnaire developed and validated by Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2008b). Participants include 103 students who enrolled in the course. The results showed that learners exhibited an overall positive attitude towards the blended course with face-to-face learning rated highest and the web environment rated lowest. Implications are made to enhance the quality of the course and provide directions for future research.

Keywords: learners' attitudes, blended learning, online learning, traditional classroom learning.

LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT A BLENDED LEARNING COURSE AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning

The rapid development of technology has enabled the popularity of online

teaching and learning all over the world. Online teaching and learning tools have been created to provide teachers and students with new teaching and learning modes, laying the foundation for such concepts as e-learning (Clark & Mayer, 2003), online learning (Khan, 1997; Carliner, 1999) or web-based learning (Horton, 2002) to have come into

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existence. However, these learning environments are not without their drawbacks as the interaction between the instructor and the learner and among the learners per se becomes loose (Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2006). Blended learning has emerged to fill this gap, addressing the seeming monotony of the traditional classroom and the lack of interactiveness of the online learning paradigm (Graham, Allen & Ure, 2003; Morgan, 2002).

Blended learning has been defined differently in literature (Clark & Mayer, 2003). Dudeney and Hockly (2007) define blended learning as a mixture of online and face-to-face course delivery. Young (2002) states that blended learning is a situation where online education is fused with traditional face-to-face instruction. From Singh and Reed's (2001) corporate viewpoint, blended learning is referred to as being 'a learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome and cost of program delivery' (p.1). Though these definitions and a number of others are not consistent in wording, they all highlight blended learning as a delivery mode that combines, to varying degrees, the classic face-to-face and computer-mediated learning environments.

Research has come to support the advantages of blended learning over single-type learning. For example, Singh and Reed (2001) associate blended learning with enhanced learning outcomes thanks to its combination of the learner's learning style and the learning program.

They explain that while the traditional classroom is a hindrance to those who cannot handle a fixed learning schedule and syllabus, various delivery modes allow them to study at their convenient time and at their own pace. They also add that various delivery modes may decrease the cost to deliver the program. Echoing Singh and Reed (2001), Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2008b) point out the benefits of blended learning, including cost reductions, time efficiency, location convenience and others. From a broader point of view, Morgan (2002) describes this delivery format as a platform that offers the best of both worlds - the most effective components of online learning environments and the most effective components of traditional classrooms.

Learners' perceptions about blended learning

Blended learning with a particular focus on perceptions and attitudes have been a fertile area for research in the world over the past couple of decades. For example, Adas and Shmais (2011) surveyed 92 non-major students enrolled in a compulsory English course at An-Najah National University. A questionnaire with 41 five-Likert scale items divided into three sections was designed to obtain the students' attitudes towards blended learning process, blended learning content, and ease of use of computer and the online software program called OCC. The quantitative data showed that the respondents had very positive views towards blended learning content (89.6%), blended learning process (76.3-

83.6%), and ease of use of technology (70.4-81.9%). Interviews were also conducted and offered rich qualitative comments in terms of slow connectivity to the OCC from home and some other times denial of Internet access, and of the need for further strengthening of technology.

Two further studies were done by Tang and Chaw (2013) and Yulia (2017) with the latter scholar replicating her predecessors' approach. They both assessed students' readiness for blended learning by investigating their perceptions about six learning aspects: learning flexibility, online learning, study management, technology, online interaction, and classroom learning. The researchers both used five-Likert scale questionnaires, but Yulia (2017) triangulated her quantitative data with qualitative interview data. Tang and Chaw (2013) administered the questionnaire to 201 undergraduate business students of a private university in Malaysia, and Yulia (2017) surveyed 108 students of the Sistem Basis Data course at Satya Wacana Christian University. The results from Tang and Chaw (2013) showed that the more positive the attitudes towards online learning, study management, online interaction and learning flexibility, the greater the adaptability and readiness of the students for blended learning. On the contrary, the stronger the need for classroom learning, the less prepared the students would be for this learning mode. In their context, the researchers also found that their respondents, a generation of 'technology-savvy' students did not face

technology problems, especially those originating from urban areas (p.95). In a similar spirit, Yulia (2017) reported that her participants indicated 'from positive to very positive' attitudes towards study management (77.3%), face-to-face/classroom learning (77%), learning flexibility (84%), online learning (84.9%), and online interaction (85.9%) (p.23).

Another significant study was by Eshreteh and Siaj (2017) who surveyed 40 English-major students and interviewed four professors at the English Department of Hebron University. They examined the students' attitudes towards technology use in general and towards blended learning. The study found a high consensus among students on the facilitative role of technology (85%) and the enhancement of interactivity in teaching and learning (80%). With respect to interview data, the professors had optimistic comments on the potential success of this learning mode. More recently, Aladwan, et al. (2018) asked 250 students in a Jodania university to complete an online questionnaire. Up to 85.4% of the respondents stated that blended learning which combined online class learning and traditional class learning was more effective than using one-way delivery of information. Other high percentages were also noted, for example, 87.3% pointed to their improved learning skills, and 78.6% acknowledged strengthened interaction between them and their instructors.

While a plethora of empirical research has confirmed learners' positive perceptions about blended learning, some

research has tapped into how this learning approach inhibited learning. Stracke (2007), for example, examined the reasons why three students dropped out of a blended learning course. The reasons were threefold: the lack of linkage and complementarity between the face-to-face and online components of the course, the lack of paper medium for reading and writing, and the objection to using computer as a vehicle for language learning. In their longitudinal study, Fryer, Bovee and Nakao (2014) investigated the role that motivation played in the required online component of a blended learning course in a Japanese university. They found that the students did not engage themselves in the course for two reasons: the low value of the tasks and the poor beliefs about their ability. The researchers therefore suggested intervening the computer-mediated section with classroom activities as soon as students felt unmotivated. They also stressed that a blended learning environment of poor quality could lead to learner's reduced satisfaction and thus affect the prospect of this learning type.

While teaching and learning in a blended fashion has been commonplace worldwide over the past few decades, it is both underexploited and under-researched in Vietnam. To the best of our knowledge, little research has been done in regard to learners' perceptions about blended learning in Vietnamese higher education. One such rare study was by Yen, Hien and Huyen (2019) who examined the perceptions of 165 students about a

blended learning environment for English training at a university in the Mekong Delta area. The finding was that more than half (50-60%) of the respondents indicated 'good perceptions' about the blended training (p.62). The researchers noted that these figures were relatively low in comparison with previous studies. They also found that their participants were troubled by technical usage and dependency on their teacher for learning motivation.

At our institution, Hanoi University of Science and Technology, not until the beginning of 2019 when the country was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic were many courses taught online, giving the impetus for its systematic initiation and deployment of a blended learning project. In order to enrich literature on learners' perceptions about blended learning in the world in general and in Vietnam in particular, this study was conducted in this setting and sought to answer the following question:

Research question: What are the learners' perceptions about a blended learning course at Hanoi University of Science and Technology?

METHODOLOGY

Context to the study and participants

The blended course under examination, English Phonetics and Phonology, was developed over the summer of 2020 and formally run among third-year English-major students at School of Foreign Languages, Hanoi University of Science

and Technology between September and December. This 15-week course covered eight different modules, of which an introductory module was delivered in class for one week, two modules - English consonants and English vowels - online for the next four weeks, and the remaining modules in class again for the rest of the course length. In this way, the course was roughly 30% virtual and 70% face-to-face. The total number of students enrolled in this course was about 150 and split into five classes. To select participants for the study, convenience sampling was used, involving 103 students (N=103) from four out of the five classes. The majority of the respondents were female, and their English proficiency levels ranged between upper-intermediate and advanced.

Instrument

A questionnaire was employed to investigate the students' perceptions about the blended course. We adopted Akkoyunlu and Soylu's (2008b) scale which consisted of 50 items and was categorized into two main parts: Part 1 – Learners' views on blended learning's implementation (35 items) and Part 2 – Learners' views on blended learning in general (15 items). This scale was referred to by virtue of its rigorous validation procedures and proven reliability, suggested by a high Cronbach's alpha of 0.88. As the focus of the present study was not on blended learning in general, items from Part 2 were intentionally eliminated. The remaining 35 questions, which were further divided by Akkoyunlu

and Soylu (2008b) into five subscales - ease of use for web environment, online environment, content, face-to-face sessions, and assessment - and rated on a 1-10 scale for each item with 1 for 'not at all' and 10 'totally true', were slightly reworded to align with the course under study. The survey was executed in English and in a paper mode.

Data collection and data analysis

We met the students and administered the survey during the final week once they had fully experienced the course. For a high response rate (which returned as 100%) and improved accuracy of the responses, each statement was orally translated into and explained in Vietnamese on demand, and the respondents were given time to rate on a scale of 1-10 before answering the next item. The survey results were then entered into the SPSS software program for quantitative analysis. To assess whether the reliability of Akkoyunlu and Soylu's (2008b) scale recurred in the context of the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was computed again and recorded at 0.91, indicative of its high internal consistency. Other descriptive statistics were calculated, including the means (M) and the standard deviations (SD) of each subscale of the questionnaire and each item in the subscale, in order to shed light on how the participants perceived the blended course. These data were organized in tabular and graphic formats and are presented in the next section of this report.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to elicit learners' perceptions as to a blended learning course, i.e. English Phonetics and Phonology, at Hanoi University of Science and Technology. To this end, it adopted the set of questions designed and validated by Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2008b) as mentioned earlier with five subscales – ease of use for the web environment, online environment, content, face-to-face sessions, and assessment. As also suggested by Akkoyunlu and Soylu, there are three score range levels based on which conclusions about learners' perceptions can be made: 1-5: low, 5.01-7: medium, 7.01-10: high. In this study, we assumed a slightly different cut score for each range and proposed corresponding labels as follows: 1-5: low/negative, 5.01-7.49: medium/neutral, 7.5-10: high/positive, and reported the mean scores assigned by the respondents to the five abovementioned subscales in an order from lowest to highest.

As can be seen from Table 1, the average score assigned to the whole scale fell just into the high range ($M=7.5$, $SD=1.8$). Generally, the learners had positive attitudes towards the blended course, but their views varied from this subscale to another. Face-to-face sessions were rated highest ($M=8.6$, $SD=1.5$) while ease of use for the web environment lowest ($M=6.5$, $SD=2.1$). The mean scores for the three other aspects – assessment, content, and online environment – were 7.7 ($SD=1.6$), 7.6 ($SD=1.8$) and 7.0 ($SD=2.1$), respectively.

Table 1: Learners' perceptions about the five subscales

Item (N=103)	Mean	SD
Ease of use for the web environment	6.5	2.1
Online environment	7.0	2.1
Content	7.6	1.8
Assessment	7.7	1.6
Face-to-face sessions	8.6	1.5
Average	7.5	1.8

Learners' perceived ease of use for the web environment

Looking at the learners' perceptions about ease of use for the web environment (Table 2), not only was the mean score the most modest but the standard deviation was also one of the two highest compared to those recorded for other subscales. Though the mean score was in the medium range ($M=6.5$), that is, the platform via which the course was run (Learning Management System, lms.hust.edu.vn) was not a big impediment, the participants did not find it highly favourable, either, not to mention that they diverged greatly in how they perceived the web environment ($SD=2.1$). What this means is that the learners differed remarkably in competencies, experiences, conditions, and expectations as far as information technology is concerned. As pointed out in Yen, Hien and Huyen (2019), their participants were bothered by technological use, or Stracke's (2007) participants even

opposed to the usage of computer for learning. In addition, this is also congruent with Adas and Shmais' (2011) interview data in which the learners articulated slow Internet connectivity from home and access denials, and Tang and Chaw's (2013) acknowledgement that those learners who did not face technological issues hailed mainly from urban areas. Of note, the group of learners surveyed in our study had mixed geographical and financial backgrounds. They were from both urban and rural areas and did not own as many supporting technological devices as their counterparts in Tang and Chaw (2013) and Yulia (2017) who used a range of devices such as smart phones, tablets, netbooks, notebooks, desktops, and were able to afford broadband Internet access subscriptions.

It is also visible from Table 2 that the overall mean score assigned to this subscale was lowered due largely to scores given to the three items *Whenever I need help in the web environment I can get it* ($M=5.7$, $SD=2.3$), *The interaction in the web environment is quite enough for me* ($M=5.9$, $SD=2.1$), and *The announcement section is prepared quite well* ($M=4.8$, $SD=2.8$). Put it differently, the learners did not praise the responsiveness and the amount of interaction on the web platform and expressed a negative attitude toward preparation of the announcement section. It is, therefore, advisable that the administrator(s) and designer(s) of the course address these issues and improve

the quality of the web environment as a whole.

Learners' perceived online environment

The online environment, within the scope of Akkoyunlu and Soyly's (2008b) scale refers to virtual forum where teaching and learning, questioning and answering, discussing and feedbacking activities of the course's online component occur. In this regard, the learners took a neutral attitude towards this aspect with a mean score categorized as medium ($M=7.0$, $SD=2.1$). Again, though this subscale received a slightly higher average score than the previous one, a high standard deviation pattern repeated, showing the learners' attitudinal dispersion. Some of the items on which their views were in great disagreement include *I can find the answers to questions provided in the forum environment* ($M=6.3$, $SD=2.2$), *I can share my thoughts and experiences with my friends in the forum environment* ($M=6.7$, $SD=2.6$), *I find that communication and mentoring in the forum environment are quite enough* ($M=6.3$, $SD=2.2$). It can be drawn from these items that the learners spelled out an expectation for a space which engaged greater sharing and communication on both parts of the learner and the instructor.

To compare with Akkoyunlu and Soyly's studies in 2006 and 2008(a), their participants respectively marked a mean score of 7.9 ($SD=1.7$) and 8.3 ($SD=1.3$) for this subscale. The difference in the scores of the present study and these two

might be ascribed to the design quality of the online sections of the courses and the learners' amount of exposure to blended learning. Both the learners and course designers in the present study had no prior experience relative to blended learning, so the course was probably not adequately supplied while the learners lacked autonomy in seeking and offering interaction, mentoring, and feedback etc. This might also elucidate why the online interactions of the Phonetics and Phonology course were not as highly

applauded as in previous studies, such as Yulia (2017) with about 85% of the respondents showing very positive attitudes towards online learning and online interaction. Furthermore, as discussed by Fryer, Bovee and Nakao (2014), the value of the tasks and motivation in the online component of a blended learning course were paramount to learners' success, it is recommended that the activities in the online forum of the course under study be varied and motivation be intensified.

Table 2: Learners' perceptions about the ease of use for the web environment

Item	N	Mean	SD
The Web environment helps me to follow courses easily.	103	6.5	2.1
Whenever I need help in the web environment I can get it.	102	5.7	2.3
I can reach the web environment wherever I want.	102	7.8	2.1
The interaction in the web environment is quite enough for me.	103	5.9	2.1
The announcement section is prepared quite well.	103	4.8	2.8
The Web site is comprehensible.	102	6.9	1.8
I find the web site quite clear.	102	7.5	1.7
Average		6.5	2.1

Table 3: Learners' perceptions about the online environment

Item	N	Mean	SD
I can use the forum easily.	100	7.8	1.8
I can find the answers to questions provided in the forum environment.	103	6.3	2.2
I can share my thoughts and experiences with my friends in the forum environment.	103	6.7	2.6
Teaching staff give feedback through forum environment.	102	7.6	1.9
The forum is supportive and helps me reinforce what I have learned.	103	7.4	1.9
I find that communication and mentoring in the forum environment are quite enough.	102	6.3	2.2
Average		7.0	2.1

Learners' perceived content and assessment

The two subscales content and assessment were both perceived as positive with respective mean scores of 7.6 (SD=1.8) and 7.7 (SD=1.6). It can be recognized that the mean scores assigned to these aspects were up while the standard deviations down, an index of the learners' increased satisfaction with the course contents and assessment-related matters and lessened disagreement in their views. These figures are close to Akkoyunlu and Soylu' findings (content: M=7.9, SD=1.8, assessment: M=7.9, SD=1.7 for the 2006 study; content: M=8.5, SD=0.9, assessment: M=8.6, SD=0.9 for the 2008b study) and are

consistent with Adas and Shmais's (2011) finding that up to 90% of the respondents expressed very positive opinions about blended learning content. It is also notable here that by content, Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2008b) meant both the online and classroom modules, so the general positive attitude towards content possibly had some merit from the classroom contents. It can be seen from Table 4 that the score given to the item *Modules in the web environment meet my needs* was lower than the others (M=6.5, SD=2.1). Hence, although the overall course contents basically fulfilled the learners' expectations, the online modules need to be further enhanced.

Table 4: Learners' perceptions about the content

Item	N	Mean	SD
Modules in the web environment are quite comprehensive including all achievements.	102	7.3	1.8
Achievements in all modules are always defined clearly.	101	8.3	1.6
Learning and teaching activities in all modules are always defined clearly.	103	8.1	1.7
Modules in the web environment meet my needs.	102	6.5	2.1
The explanation of the subject helps me to learn the subject.	103	7.2	1.8
Worksheets help me to understand what I have learned.	103	7.4	1.9
References and narration meet my need.	102	6.9	2.2
Length and presentation of the subject help me to follow the subject easily.	103	7.2	2.1
The teacher completes missing subjects during the face-to-face sessions.	103	8.4	1.9
Generally, I can find the answers to my questions during the face-to-face sessions.	103	8.3	1.4
I can find the answers to my questions during the face-to-face sessions.	102	7.8	1.7
Average		7.6	1.8

Table 5: Learners' perceptions about the assessment

Item	N	Mean	SD
Evaluation criteria in the web environment guide us in how and what to do in our assessment activities.	103	7.4	1.6
Mentoring about the projects helps us a lot and makes the assessment activities easy for us.	103	8.1	1.4
Evaluation criteria are clear and understandable.	103	7.8	1.6
Interval assessments during face-to-face sessions help us to complete the assessment activities easily.	103	7.6	1.9
Average		7.7	1.6

Learners' perceived face-to-face sessions

Face-to-face sessions, or classroom learning or traditional learning as termed in other studies, were rated highest of the five subscales (M=8.6). The learners also reached a higher consensus in assigning scores to this section of the survey (SD=1.5). This is indicative of the learners' general preference of physical meetings to virtual ones thanks to fostered interaction, communication and discussion

between them and the instructor, and thus deeper understanding and retention of a given subject (Table 6). This finding is echoed in Yulia (2017) in which the participants, though demonstrating their readiness for blended learning, had a very positive perception about face-to-face learning. Or, as Stracke (2007) critically pointed out, not every learner advocated a blended learning environment as the face-to-face and online components did not always complement one another.

Table 6: Learners' perceptions about the face-to-face sessions

Item	N	Mean	SD
Face-to-face sessions help me to learn about subjects in detail.	100	8.6	1.3
Sharing and discussion environment in face-to-face sessions are quite good.	103	8.3	1.6
It would be better if teachers explained the subject during the face-to-face sessions.	103	8.7	1.4
Face-to-face interaction is quite useful for understanding the subject much better.	103	8.8	1.3
Face-to-face environment with gestures and mime is quite effective.	103	8.7	1.5
Face-to-face interaction helps me to learn better and assists in the retention of information about the subject.	102	8.6	1.8
If something went wrong in web environment, we would need face-to-face interaction to make things clear.	103	8.4	1.6
Average		8.6	1.5

To sum up, the learners in this study showed positive perceptions about the blended learning course. This is congruent with most of previous studies in this field (Adas and Shmais, 2011; Tang and Chaw, 2013, Yulia, 2017; Eshreth and Sij, 2017; Yen, Huyen and Hien, 2019). The learners expressed positive attitudes towards content, assessment, especially face-to-face sessions with assigned mean scores falling into the high range but kept neutral attitudes towards ease of use of the web environment and the online environment.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated learners' perceptions about the blended learning course named English Phonetics and Phonology at Hanoi University of Science and Technology. Adopting Akkoyunlu and Soylu's (2008b) meticulously validated questionnaire, it looked into the mean scores the respondents assigned to five aspects: ease of use of the web environment, online environment, content, assessment, and face-to-face sessions. Generally, the learners demonstrated positive attitudes towards the course, yet improvements can still be made in some areas. First, the web environment, i.e. the Learning Management System LMS, needs to be enhanced by providing prompt help when requested, increasing the amount of interaction, and updating and upgrading the announcement section. Second, the communication in the online learning section should be fostered in a way that the learners merit from the instructor's and their peers' discussion,

feedback, and sharing. Finally, the contents of the online modules should be adjusted to fit the learners' ability and needs.

There are a number of limitations to this study. As it looked at a content-based course, the generalizability of the findings to general English courses might not be strong. Furthermore, it only analysed quantitative data while qualitative insights could have shed greater light on the learners' perceptions. In this regard, future studies can consider taking a mixed methods approach so that insightful comments can be obtained in order to elucidate and/or enrich quantitative data. For example, interviews can be conducted to ask the learners clarify how much and what other kinds of interaction they need when rating the item *The interaction in the web environment is quite enough for me* very low.

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