BLENDED LEARNING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

1st year student of the University of Information Technologies and Management Lisguistics, English Language

Aziza Juraboyevna Maydonova

Abstract

This article examines the conceptual framework and pedagogical potential of blended learning in secondary EFL education. It argues that traditional, teacher-centered models often fail to bridge the gap between grammatical knowledge and communicative fluency. By integrating face-to-face instruction with online learning, the blended model offers a strategic design that enhances student autonomy, provides multimodal input, and optimizes classroom time for interactive activities. The paper emphasizes that successful implementation depends on the pedagogical alignment of online and offline components, as well as contextual readiness, including teacher competencies and institutional support.

Keywords

Blended learning, EFL instruction, secondary education, communicative competence, learner autonomy, pedagogical design.

In the contemporary educational landscape, the rapid integration of digital technologies has necessitated a fundamental shift in pedagogical methodologies. Traditional face-to-face instruction, particularly in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), is increasingly viewed as insufficient to meet the communicative and autonomous learning needs of 21st-century students. Within this context, **blended learning** has emerged not merely as a technological supplement, but as a transformative instructional system that strategically integrates classroom experiences with online learning.

Scholars such as Bliuc et al. and Garrison and Kanuka define blended learning as a thoughtful integration of co-present interactions and technologically mediated resources. Unlike simple "e-learning," the power of a blended approach lies in its ability to redesign courses around **inquiry, interaction, and integration**. For secondary education, this model is often operationalized as a formal program where students exercise control over the time, place, path, or pace of their learning, while still benefiting from supervised, brick-and-mortar instruction (Staker & Horn) The urgency of adopting such models is particularly evident in secondary school systems—such as that of Vietnam—where English instruction remains predominantly teacher-centered and exam-oriented. This traditional approach often results in a "structural gap," where students gain grammatical knowledge but fail to develop communicative competence due to limited class time and a lack of authentic input. Blended learning addresses these challenges by extending the learning environment; it allows for sustained exposure to multimodal input online while reserving the physical classroom for high-value activities such as collaborative problem-solving and spontaneous discussion. However, the transition to a blended model is a complex "design problem" rather than a simple technical upgrade. Its effectiveness depends on the **pedagogical alignment** between online and offline components and is deeply influenced by contextual factors, including teacher beliefs, student self-regulation, and institutional support.

Subsequent definitions have stressed the systematic and interaction-oriented nature of blended learning. Bliuc and colleagues described blended learning as learning activities that systematically combine co-present (face-to-face) interactions with technologically mediated interactions between students, teachers, and learning resources Garrison and Kanuka similarly argued that blended learning should be seen as the thoughtful integration of classroom experiences with online experiences, emphasising that its transformative potential lies in re-designing courses around inquiry, interaction, and integration rather than simply mixing delivery modes. For

school education, Staker and Horn offered a more operational and stringent definition: blended learning is a formal education programme in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction, with some degree of control over time, place, path, or pace, and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home. Across these definitions, the common element is that students are exposed to both online and face-to-face learning experiences, and that these two modes are designed to connect and complement each other rather than to function as separate systems.

More recent scholarship has reframed blended learning as the purposeful integration of face-to-face instruction with online learning experiences within a single course or programme, in which pedagogy, rather than technology, drives the design of activities. Graham and others emphasise that blended learning should be understood as a strategic combination of modalities that uses the strengths of each mode to support interaction, differentiation, and feedback, instead of being viewed as a simple technological innovation. From this perspective, blended learning is a design problem: teachers decide what is best achieved in the classroom (for example, discussion, group work, immediate clarification) and what can be more effectively supported online (such as individual practice, extended input, or self-paced review). Reviews of blended learning research show that student outcomes and satisfaction tend to improve when there is strong alignment and continuity between online and offline components, including coherent task sequencing, clear expectations, and explicit connections between what happens in class and what happens online. When the online environment is treated merely as optional extra practice, students often do not engage deeply and the potential benefits of blending are not realized. These conceptual developments are particularly relevant for secondary schools where traditional teaching models still dominate. In many systems, including Vietnamese Steacher-centred, face-to-face lessons that focus on grammar explanation, translation, and textbook-based exercises. This approach reflects examination

pressures and curriculum requirements but often gives limited space for meaningful communication and active language use. As a result, students commonly show weaknesses in communicative competence, particularly in speaking and listening, even after several years of study. Research has identified several challenges that restrict effective English learning at the secondary level. First, learner motivation tends to be low when classroom activities are repetitive and strongly exam-oriented, reducing students' sense of relevance and enjoyment. Second, in EFL contexts where English is not used in daily communication, students have little access to authentic input beyond the classroom walls. Third, limited class time means that many learners do not have enough opportunity to practise language skills to a level that builds fluency and confidence. These issues illustrate a structural gap between the amount and type of practice that learners need and what can be provided through traditional, time-bound lessons alone.

Blended learning has been proposed as a promising response to these challenges in secondary schools because it can extend learning opportunities beyond the classroom while preserving the benefits of direct teacher guidance. In an English as a foreign language context, blended designs can offer students sustained exposure to multimodal input through videos, audio resources, interactive online exercises, and digital texts, which support listening, reading, and vocabulary development in ways that are hard to achieve solely during limited face-to-face lessons. Online platforms and learning management systems enable asynchronous practice: students complete tasks at home or in school computer rooms, receive automated or teacher-provided feedback, and can repeat activities according to their own needs and pace. This flexibility supports learner autonomy, allows differentiation for different proficiency levels, and can increase motivation by providing varied, interactive tasks instead of only textbook exercises. In the classroom, teachers can then concentrate on communicative activities, collaborative problem solving, project work, and targeted explanation of difficulties that have emerged in the online component. In this way,

face-to-face and online activities form a coherent cycle: what students do online prepares and enriches in-class work, and what they do in class feeds back into and structures their online learning. A central insight from the literature is that the effectiveness of blended learning in secondary schools depends heavily on how well the two components are integrated. Nortvig and colleagues, in their review of blended learning research, highlight that successful designs are characterised by strong connections between online and offline tasks, explicit guidance, and clear communication of expectations to students. For language education, these connections are crucial because language learning is cumulative and depends on sustained input, repeated practice, and timely feedback over an extended period. When blended learning is carefully planned, it can systematically increase three conditions widely recognised as central to language development: input (exposure to meaningful language), output (opportunities for learners to produce language), and interaction (negotiation of meaning with peers and teachers). For example, online discussion forums, collaborative documents, and video-based speaking tasks can extend communicative activities beyond the classroom and create additional opportunities for interaction that would not fit into traditional timetables. At the same time, teachers can use data from online platforms (such as completion rates and error patterns) to diagnose learners' needs and adapt face-to-face instruction. However, the adoption of blended learning in secondary schools is not simply a technical choice; it is deeply shaped by contextual factors such as student readiness, teacher beliefs, and institutional support. Students need a certain level of digital literacy, regular access to devices and the internet, and sufficient self-regulation skills to benefit from online components of blended courses. If these conditions are not met, the risk is that blended learning will widen gaps between students rather than reduce them. Teachers' perceptions and competencies are equally important: educators must see technology as a means to support pedagogy, not as an add-on burden, and they need practical knowledge of how to design tasks, manage online interaction, and provide feedback in blended environments. Professional

development and ongoing support are therefore critical to help teachers move beyond simple substitution (for example, uploading worksheets online) toward richer integration of digital resources and classroom practice. At the institutional level, school leadership needs to provide clear policies, technical infrastructure, and realistic expectations about workload and assessment in order for blended learning to become a sustainable part of the school's instructional model. Consequently, empirical research in specific secondary school contexts – such as studies conducted in individual schools or districts – is essential to understand how blended learning influences student outcomes, motivation, and classroom practices, and to inform policy decisions that respect local conditions and needs.

Blended learning in secondary schools can therefore be understood as an instructional system that distributes learning across time and space, purposefully linking online and face-to-face experiences to enhance engagement, autonomy, and achievement, especially in demanding areas such as foreign language learning. Rather than replacing teachers or traditional classrooms, blended learning redefines their role: the classroom becomes a site for interaction, collaboration, and higher-order thinking, while online environments provide extended input, individual practice, and flexible pathways through content. For many secondary schools, the key challenge is not whether to use technology, but how to design and support blended models that are pedagogically coherent, equitable, and responsive to learners' needs. In this sense, blended learning should be viewed less as a temporary response to technological change and more as a long-term strategy for rethinking teaching and learning in ways that make better use of the full range of available environments and resources.

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