TEACHERS' CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING BLENDED LEARNING IN UZBEKISTAN UNIVERSITIES

Sevinch Anvarova
Department of English, New Uzbekistan University,
Movarounnahr str. 1, Tashkent 100000, Uzbekistan
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22934473

Abstract

This study investigates the challenges faced by English language teachers when implementing blended learning in universities in Uzbekistan and explores the strategies used to address these challenges. Using a qualitative research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 university teachers from five Uzbek universities. The findings show that blended learning is widely used and provides several benefits, including flexibility, improved technological proficiency, student engagement, and independent learning. However, teachers reported significant challenges, particularly increased workload, technical difficulties, classroom management, assessment transparency, time management, and limited emotional interaction with students. The findings also indicate that teachers address these challenges through increased use of interactive technologies, pre-designed lesson activities, simplified online components, and preparation for technical problems. At the institutional level, teachers emphasized the need for improved internet connectivity and technological infrastructure, regular professional development and training, and better digital assessment tools. The study highlights that effective blended learning requires cooperation among teachers, universities, faculties, and students. The findings may contribute to improving blended EFL instruction and supporting the development of more effective blended learning practices in Uzbek higher education.

Introduction

Modern digital technologies have significantly transformed the whole education system, examination process, and traditional lessons, making them more flexible and interactive. This has become especially evident after the COVID-19 pandemic, when online and blended learning began to be actively used at universities. This gave a chance for students to study at home and for teachers to work and conduct the lessons on a distance. However, along with these new opportunities, educators came across with some challenges. The most common of them are: increasing teacher workload, organizing student interactions, maintaining attention in the class, and having emotional connection with their students from various locations. Among all universities from all over the world, blended learning style issues are particularly pressing Uzbek universities, educators, and students as well. It is mainly because, the transition to distance learning has demonstrated how challenging this process can be for everyone involved (Akhmedjanova and Kerimova, 2024).

First main problem is that many teachers face daily and basic challenges in simply realizing the mixed teaching style and deeply understanding the whole concept of the term "blended learning" (Hrastinski, 2019). Because, this is not just about gadgets or the online lessons at home, but rather about a radical change of the traditional way of imparting knowledge, which has been getting us from generation to generation to the globalized way of conducting lesson through new technologies and gadgets. Therefore, mastering new digital methods seems very challenging (Nazarova et al., 2023). Faculty members often have to rewrite the course plans, balance online and offline lessons, and master new technologies as part of the transition to blended learning. As Dau (2013) and Snelling, Karanikolas, and Winning (2016) have shown, faculty members often face resistance or stress when trying to balance their professional identities with changing educational roles. Furthermore, Nõuakas, Petjärv, and Uukkivi (2023) note that faculty in hybrid-flexible styles face the additional challenge of simultaneously delivering curriculum to both in-person and online students, which makes even harder the administrative responsibilities. Because teachers need to switch from one type of teaching which is traditional to another – new and complicated. For example, during the lockdown, universities in South Africa discovered that

online teaching methods were poorly developed and the workload was too heavy (Wagner, Masango, & Moch, 2024). In parallel, technical colleges also encountered difficulties especially in teaching practical courses online (Manditereza & Chamboko-Mpotaringa, 2024). In addition, the predictions of Abdurahman & Ahmad (2022) inform that for future teachers, blended learning offers flexibility, but requires a high level of self-discipline as it takes a lot of time and energy to conduct both online and offline lessons. In Uzbekistan, for example, Nazirova et al. (2023) reached to the similar findings, mentioning the teachers' overload and difficulties in adapting the methods which can be suitable to both types of lessons. All of this reflects a common problem facing Uzbek universities: finding optimal blended learning models.

The first main problem of the blended learning takes us to the second issue which is according to Khrastinsky (2019) the varieties of the definition of "blended learning" across contexts, leading to misunderstandings in researches and lessons. Therefore, as there are several models of organizing the blended lessons, the universities cannot always set to the teachers the clear and correct direction of it. As a result, teachers are forced to independently find ways to combine different formats in a single course (Muller & Mildenberger, 2021). For that reason, the effective use of blended lessons requires from teachers both professional teaching methods and access to them (Kumar, Krishnamurthy, and Masood, 2021).

On top of this, the educators need digital competence and confidence in their lessons (Sun and Chen, 2016) as it can easily damage the students' attitude towards teachers' professionalism. For this very reason, it can cause anxiety among teachers with a lack of digital skills and makes more pressure to them (Abdurahman & Ahmad, 2022). In Uzbekistan, for instance, Akhmedjanova and Kerimova (2024) noted that both students and teachers experienced problems while blended lessons due to the poor internet access, low digital literacy, and insufficient training, which eventually led to despair for all participants of the lesson.

The next important complexity is the frequent notion of the infrastructure limitations at the universities in various studies. There are the insufficient infrastructure, lack of technical assistance, and unequal access at the universities according to the review about online learning challenges (Sun et al., 2015). As Kumar et al. (2021) noted, the integration tools require continuous institutional policies, government funds, and systemic support, even when they are already available. In the context of Uzbekistan, the support and aid should be doubled as this type of education is gradually beginning to expand. Because, as Lee, Lau, and Yip (2016) mentioned the success of blended lessons in Chinese EFL lessons partially depends on the support of universities and professional development programs.

Therefore, for blended learning to be implemented effectively, responsibility must be shared by all participants: teachers must redesign courses and master technologies, universities must provide infrastructure and internet access, and students must maintain discipline and attend the classes on time even if it is hybrid.

In the previous global and Uzbek studies the scholars have focused on blended teaching styles, teacher inexperience, communication issues, universities' responsibility for infrastructure and etc. However, these studies have overlooked teachers' personal experiences and how they cope with these challenges. This creates a gap that can be explored through interviews or surveys with Uzbek university teachers and other faculty members, focusing on identifying teachers' individual real stumbling blocks while conducting blended lessons with university students. In order to address this gap, this study will investigate teachers' challenges from different prospects with these following questions: What challenges do English language teachers at universities face when implementing blended learning in their classrooms? How do these teachers solve the problems facing in blended EFL lesson?

Background

In order to understand the whole core concept and strategies of bended learning it is principal to be aware of its history. The first teacher, who conducted distance lessons was Sir Isaac Pitman. By sending shorthand texts to the students, he made possible to study wherever it is convenient to them. Then in 1960's and 1970's the lessons with mini-computer and mainframe training became effective for the educational places where for the first time the books, materials could be used by students without

printing thousands of paper shits. One of the most well-known systems was “Plato” in Champaign, USA. After these innovations in the history of teaching and education, blended learning method became more and more useful and popular among teachers, which lead to TV-based live training lessons, CD-room trainings, Web-based instructions and the rise of LMS. Nowadays we find ourselves in an already developed period of blended learning, where technology is rapidly changing, so that the union between distance and traditional learning can produce better results than some only traditional lessons. These days even small companies, educational centers have the opportunity to educate online and hybrid through their own platforms.

On the other hand, along with these new opportunities, educators came across with some challenges. The most common of them are: increasing teacher workload, organizing student interactions, maintaining attention in the class, and having emotional connection with their students from various locations. First main problem is the challenge in mastering a new digital method (Nazarova et al., 2023). Faculty members have to rewrite the course plans, balance online and offline lessons, and master new technologies as part of the transition to blended learning. As Dau (2013) and Snelling, Karanikolas, and Winning (2016) have shown, faculty members often face resistance or stress when trying to balance their professional identities with changing educational roles. Furthermore, Nõuakas, Petjärv, and Uukkivi (2023) note that faculty in hybrid-flexible styles face the additional challenge of simultaneously delivering curriculum to both in-person and online students, which makes even harder the administrative responsibilities. Because teachers need to switch from one type of teaching which is traditional to another – new and complicated. In Uzbekistan, for example, Nazirova et al. (2023) reached to the similar findings, mentioning the teachers' overload and difficulties in adapting the methods which can be suitable to both types of lessons. All of this reflects a common problem facing Uzbek universities: finding optimal blended learning models. Another main issue is according to Khrastinsky (2019) the varieties of the definition of "blended learning" across contexts, leading to misunderstandings in researches and lessons. Therefore, as there are several models of organizing the blended lessons, the universities cannot always set to the teachers the clear and correct direction of it. As a result, teachers are forced to independently find ways to combine different formats in a single course (Muller & Mildenberger, 2021). On top of this, the educators need digital competence and confidence in their lessons (Sun and Chen, 2016) as it can easily damage the students’ attitude towards teachers’ professionalism. In Uzbekistan, for instance, Akhmedjanova and Kerimova (2024) noted that both students and teachers experienced problems while blended lessons due to the poor internet access, low digital literacy, and insufficient training, which eventually led to despair for all participants of the lesson. The next important complexity is the frequent notion of the infrastructure limitations at the universities in various studies. There are the insufficient infrastructure, lack of technical assistance, and unequal access at the universities according to the review about online learning challenges (Sun et al., 2015). In the context of Uzbekistan, the support and aid should be doubled as this type of education is gradually beginning to expand. Therefore, for blended learning to be implemented effectively, responsibility must be shared by all participants: teachers must redesign courses and master technologies, universities must provide infrastructure and internet access, and students must maintain discipline and attend the classes on time even if it is hybrid.

In the previous global and Uzbek studies the scholars have focused on blended teaching styles, teacher inexperience, communication issues, universities’ responsibility for infrastructure and etc. However, these studies have overlooked teachers’ personal experiences and how they cope with these challenges. This creates a gap that can be explored through interviews or surveys with Uzbek university teachers and other faculty members, focusing on identifying teachers’ individual real stumbling blocks while conducting blended lessons with university students. In order to address this gap, this study will investigate teachers’ challenges from different prospects with these following questions: What challenges do English language teachers at universities face when implementing blended learning in their classrooms? How do these teachers solve the problems facing in blended EFL lesson?

Analysis

This research is about teachers’ challenges in implementing blended learning in Uzbekistani universities. In order to understand this main idea several studies have done, in those global and Uzbek

studies the scholars have focused on blended teaching styles, teacher inexperience, communication issues, universities' responsibility for infrastructure and etc. However, these studies have overlooked teachers' personal experiences and how they cope with these challenges. In order to address this gap, this study will investigate teachers' challenges from different prospects with these following questions:

1. What challenges do English language teachers at universities face when implementing blended learning in their classrooms?

2. How can these teachers, universities and faculties solve the problems facing in blended EFL lesson?

Methodology

The potential gap can be explored through interviews with Uzbek university teachers and other faculty members, focusing on identifying teachers' individual real stumbling blocks while conducting blended lessons with university students. In order to address both research questions, 10 teachers' interviews from 5 different universities were explored. 10 participants represent 5 universities, which are New Uzbekistan University, Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Tashkent State Pedagogical university, National university of Uzbekistan, Tashkent University of Economics.

Questions of the interviews:

1. Did you teach blended type of lessons?
2. What are the advantages of the blended lessons?
3. What is the main challenge in these blended lessons?
4. What do you do to come across with these challenges during the lessons?
5. What kind of possible solutions can universities and faculties provide to solve these issues?

These interview questions were asked from teachers individually, because of some teachers excuses the videos or audios of the interviews were not recorded. In order to make it anonymous the answers for each question will be given in the form of "Interviewee 1, 2, 3…".

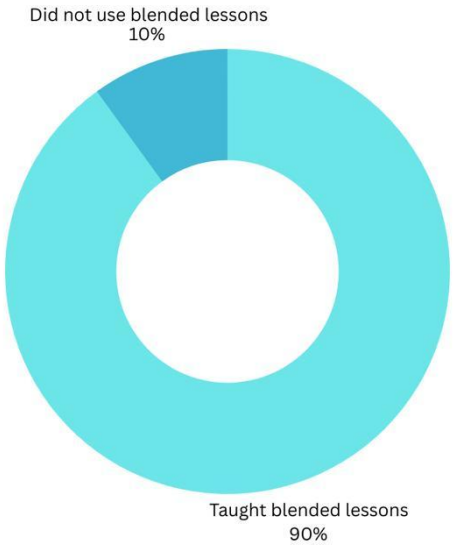
Findings and Results

Qualitative analysis: Interviews

Responses of teachers for the first question.

Q1: Do you like blended type of lessons?

Chart 1. The descriptive statistics of the utilization of blended lessons



As it is shown in this chart, 90% of interviewed teachers used blended type of teaching method in their experience, while only 10% of them never used. This means that the blended lessons are widely-used in Uzbekistani universities. 50% of them added: "We started to use this teaching method after COVID 19 pandemic, only after this we started to look serious to this method".

Table 1 below shows the answers to the second question: What are the advantages of the blended type of lessons?

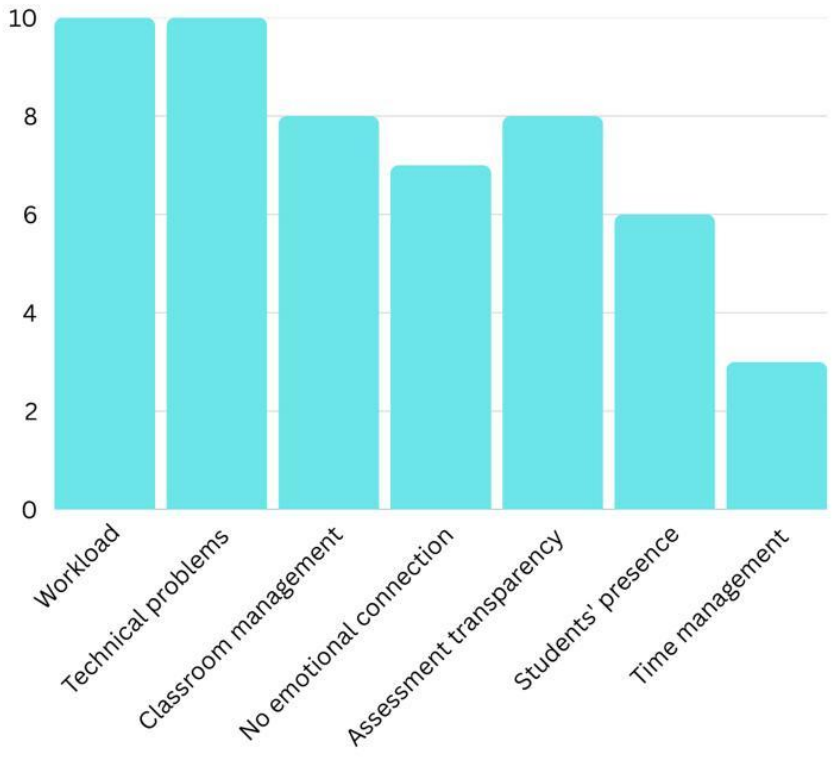
Table 1. The descriptive statistics of the common advantages of blended learning according to university teachers

Advantages	Number of interviewees mentioned pross	Proportion
Flexibility	10	100%
Technology proficiency	10	100%
Student engagement	9	90%
Improves independent learning	7	70%
Easy to track students' progress	4	40%

This table was done according to the individual answers of universities teachers. According to this table for 100% of teachers blended learning provides flexibility and technology proficiency. 90% of interviewed teachers mentioned student engagement as a advantage of the blended learning, another 70% highlighted that this teaching method improves students' independent learning. Finally, 40% of teachers added the ease of tracking students' progress, which as followed by the other question why is it easy. Interestingly, those teachers used special programs or even games time to time to check the progress or regress of students understanding and saved the data continuously, which was easy to identify as this was done by the apps.

The Bar Graph 1 below shows the challenges which come across by teachers while conducting the blended learning lessons, which answers to the Question 3: What is the main challenge in these blended lessons?

Bar graph 1. Descriptive statistics of teachers' challenges in blended lessons.



This table shows that teachers admitted that they mainly experience difficulties with overwhelming amount of workload with covering both online and offline lessens and with some technical problems. 8 out of 10 interviewees mentioned the challenges with classroom management and assessment transparency. Other less mentioned factors are absence of emotional connection, students' presence, and time management. This bar graph clearly shows previously mentioned challenges in blended lessons at the universities.

The next table will show the provided possible solutions by teachers during the lessons. The asked question 4: What do you do to come across with these challenges during the lessons?

Table 2. The descriptive statistics of possible solutions for teachers given by university teachers

The proportion of teachers, provided these solutions	Solutions	Clarification
100%	Increasing student engagement	Use quizzes, multimedia…
80%	Simplifying online parts	Teach difficult themes in the classroom, use games and activities in online parts
70%	Managing time beforehand	Use pre-designed activities, lesson plans
60%	Preparing for technical problems	Always prepare activities which can work without internet. Send links before the class.
30%	Supporting students	Before the lesson small video instruction about app usage can be sent to students.

According to Table 2, teachers' answers show that they know 100% how to increase student' interaction by using multimedia tools and quizzes. 80 % of teachers gave another good solution to come across with the overwhelm of combining offline and online elements in the lessons. The solution to this is simplifying online parts: conducting complicated topics in the classroom face-to-face and giving tasks and activities online. Additionally, 70% of teachers use pre-designed activities and lesson plans to fix the problem with time management. Another problem with technical connection was solved by 60% of teachers with activities, which can work without internet connection. In fact, only 30% of teachers highlighted the importance of supporting students with bad digital skills before the lessons.

The next chart below shows the solutions which must come from universities and faculties to fix with the challenges.

Q 5: What kind of possible solutions can universities and faculties provide to solve these issues?

Table 2. The descriptive statistics of possible solutions for universities and faculties given by university teachers.

The proportion of teachers, provided these solutions	Solutions	Clarification
100%	Technology improvement	University should provide more equipment to each class and improve the internet connection.
80%	Trainings	Faculties should organize regular trainings and workshops on tips to teach

		blended type of lessons.
70%	Provide tools	University should provide free tools for assessing plagiarism and AI
20%	Policies	Universities and faculties should establish powerful policies for attendance of students and their grades.
10%	Find the ways for student access	In cases when student does not have digital tool, university should provide them special well-equipped classrooms.

According to Table 3, 100% of teachers' answers show that university is responsible for the internet access and technological tools used in the blended lessons. Moreover, 80% of teachers highlighted the importance of trainings for teachers in order to master technological and methodological skills in this blended type. Other 70% of them focused on the assessment tools to check plagiarism and AI, as in the blended and online lessons it is complicated for teachers to monitor the class during assignments or activity responses. Interestingly, 20% of interviewees said about significance of university policies about attendance so that students should 100% participate in both online and offline lessons. Only 10% of interviewed university teachers mentioned the student access at the universities, as some students might have financial difficulties with digital technologies.

Discussion

The data gathered through interview from 10 university teachers of 5 different universities allows to identify main challenges faced by university teachers while conducting the blended learning method and to sum up with possible solutions of them for both teachers and universities. This findings fully addressed the research questions given in the study.

RQ1: What challenges do English language teachers at universities face when implementing blended learning in their classrooms?

The interview shows that nowadays teachers face different challenges in implementing blended learning to the lessons. These problems vary, they can come from the teachers' side or faculty and universities' side as well. A major issue according to interviewed teachers is the lack of digital competence in the blended lessons. This problem is closely connectable with the Mishra and Koehler's TPACK framework, which highlights that teacher might have strong pedagogical knowledge but might struggle with the technology usage in blended or online lessons. This idea was also the main focus in the studies of Abdurahman and Ahmad (2022) and Ahmendjanova and Kerimova (2023), who found that bad internet connection and limited knowledge on the digital tools may become a stumbling stock in blending both online and offline lessons together. Despite the lack of digital competence and technical problems, 8 out of 10 interviewees mentioned the challenges with classroom management and assessment transparency. Other less mentioned factors are absence of emotional connection, students' presence, and time management. Finding these main challenges in the blended lessons are closely linked with the RQ1, the core concept of which was to identify main challenges faced by university teachers.

RQ2: How can these teachers, universities and faculties solve the problems facing in blended EFL lesson?

Based on teachers' interviews, it can be concluded that the problems can be fixed by teachers, faculties, and the universities. In the Tables 2, 3 there are given possible solutions by teachers, mainly they are: 1. the improvement of technological literacy, 2. internet connection and 3. student engagement were given by 100% of interviewees. The usage of CoI (Community of Inquiry) (Garrison et al.) specifically video explanations, discussions with students should develop technology understanding of both teachers and students. Therefore, these sorts of instructions must be given by faculties to the

teachers, and by teachers to the students. With the help of this chain provided by university (Nazirova at al., 2023) both teachers and students can easily handle challenges with technology or internet access. Other less mentioned solutions are: 4. Managing time beforehand, 5. Simplifying online parts, 7. Policies established by universities and faculties. These solutions are given for both teachers and universities, which mostly directly correlates with the main challenges in these blended lessons. This means that teachers approximately 80% know the problems in blended lessons and they are already thinking about the ways to solve them.

Conclusion

This study is about the challenges in the blended learning lessons and possible solutions, which was identified with the help of interviews taken from teachers. With the help of taken interviews, the answers for Research Questions are identified: 1. The main challenges faced by teachers in the blended lessons 2. The possible solutions to these problems, which can be done by both authorities and teachers. Thus, this study findings indicate the need for further improvements from the teacher, university, and faculty perspectives, especially they need to deeply focus on the problems in the blended lessons and improve the quality of blended lessons in Uzbekistan.

References

1. Abdurahman, N. D., & Ahmad, Y. B. (2022). Pre-service English teachers' challenges and opportunities in flex model blended learning-assisted: Narrative inquiry. Jurnal Pendidikan dan Konseling.
2. Akhmedjanova, D., & Kerimova, I. (2024). University students and teachers' experiences with distance education in Uzbekistan. Journal of Eastern European and Central Asian Research, 11(1).
3. Ahmendjanova, D., & Kerimova, M. (2023). Digital competence and technological barriers among EFL teachers in blended learning environments. Uzbekistan Journal of Pedagogical Innovations, 11(2), 112–126.
4. Choice of blended learning models for higher pedagogical universities in Uzbekistan. (n.d.).
5. Dau, S. (2013). When design meets identities: A case study of blended learning in undergraduate education. In Proceedings of the 6th International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation (ICERI 2013).
6. Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2001). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. The Internet and Higher Education, 2(2–3), 87–105. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6
7. Hrastinski, S. (2019). What do we mean by blended learning? TechTrends.
8. Kumar, A., Krishnamurthi, R., & Masud, M. (2021). Blended learning tools and practices: A comprehensive analysis. IEEE Access.
9. Lee, Y. C., Lau, K. C., & Yip, V. W. Y. (2016). Blended learning for building student-teachers' capacity to learn and teach science-related interdisciplinary subjects: The case of Hong Kong. Asian Association of Open Universities Journal.
10. Manditereza, B., & Chamboko-Mpotaringa, M. (2024). Blended learning approach in TVET colleges: Lecturers and students' perceptions. Journal of Education and Learning Technology.
11. Mishra, P., & Koehler, M. J. (2006). Technological pedagogical content knowledge: A framework for teacher knowledge. Teachers College Record, 108(6), 1017–1054.
12. Müller, C., & Mildenberger, T. (2021). Facilitating flexible learning by replacing classroom time with an online learning environment: A systematic review of blended learning in higher education. Educational Research Review.
13. Nazirova, N., Alimova, S., & Rakhmonova, K. (2023). University support systems for blended learning in Uzbekistan: Infrastructure, training, and policy considerations. Central Asian Journal of Educational Research, 5(4), 73–89.
14. Nazirova, S. O., Jalolova, S. M., & Agzamova, D. B. (2023). The problems faced by the teachers in teaching English as a foreign language in Uzbekistan. Sustainable Development Goals, 11(12).

15. Nõuakas, K., Petjärv, B., & Uukkivi, A. (2023). Challenges of hybrid flexible (HyFlex) learning on the example of a University of Applied Sciences. In Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems.
16. Philipsen, B., Tondeur, J., Pareja Roblin, N., Vanslambrouck, S., & Zhu, C. (2019). Improving teacher professional development for online and blended learning: A systematic meta-aggregative review. Educational Research Review.
17. Snelling, C., Karanicolas, S., & Winning, T. (2016). From concept to practice: Helping teachers to create effective flipped classrooms. In Proceedings of the European Conference on e-Learning (ECEL).
18. Sun, A., & Chen, X. (2016). Online education and its effective practice: A research review. Journal of Information Technology Education: Research.
19. Wagner, F., Masango, M., Moch, S., et al. (2024). Challenges of teaching and learning under lockdown at Wits University: Implications for the future of blended learning. Progressio.