

Blended Learning in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in China: A Case of Comprehensive English Courses

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Abstract: Blended learning has gained new implications with the development of the Internet, particularly in the context of the global pandemic in recent years. Various educational systems around the world, including China, have witnessed a significant increase in integrating blended learning in teaching English courses for English majors. In the field of higher education, blended learning finds its particular application to a great variety of courses, especially language courses. Under the teaching philosophy of “Outcome-based Education” and via the “Production-oriented Approach”, Comprehensive English courses targeting non-English majors in some universities in China are delivered by means of blended learning. This study presents a detailed case analysis of blended learning in the teaching of Comprehensive English courses for English majors in China, covering course design, learning activities, flipped classroom design, students’ evaluation mechanism, and students’ feedback. The findings reveal that blended learning has greatly transformed the course delivery mode, innovated the teaching of English as a Foreign Language in China, and improved effectively students learning abilities and English capacities. By blended learning, instruction of Comprehensive English course has been innovated in multiple dimensions, including the selection of learning materials for students who are of different proficiency levels, the design of adaptive learning activities, effective integration of online and offline learning, the conducting of theme-based flipped classrooms to develop students’ critical thinking skills and values, and the tracking of students’ learning outcomes. Based on the empirical data and innovative practices in teaching Comprehensive English courses, this study provides valuable implications for applying blended learning in language courses in the international academic community, particularly for scholars in the field of teaching English as a Foreign Language in China.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Comprehensive English Courses, Outcome-Based Education (OBE), Production-Oriented Approach (POA), Flipped Classroom

1. Introduction

Blended learning, in a broad sense, includes a mix of learning theories, learning resources, learning environments, learning styles, and learning assessments [1]. In a narrow sense, blended learning refers to the combination of face-to-face teaching and online learning [2]. In this study, we explored blended learning in its narrow sense.

As an innovative learning manner, blended learning offers a range of pedagogical benefits that can enhance the educational experience for both students and teachers.

Blended learning boasts of remarkable advantages in increased learning effectiveness, satisfaction, efficiency [3, 4], and so on. Against the backdrop of advanced development of Internet and updating global communications revolution, blended learning has witnessed its applications to a great variety of courses in various disciplines all around the world, such as language, social science, economics, psychology, medicine, and international relations, to name just a few.

Blended learning has been widely implemented in higher education in China, including the teaching of English as a

foreign language (EFL). Many colleges and universities in China have adopted blended learning for both English majors and non-English majors. According to Li Yuzhen et al. [5], the initial stage of blended learning in EFL teaching in China was between 2004 to 2016. Then rapid development was seen between 2017 and 2019. In recent years, especially since 2021, EFL teaching in China has made significant progress in the practice of and research upon blended learning.

This study examines how blended learning has been integrated into the EFL teaching for English majors in the current era of "Internet +," and explores its potential for development. The target course, Comprehensive English, is a four-semester programme (I, II, III, and IV) that teaches students the essential language skills required of English majors in China's colleges and universities. This study focuses on the implementation of blended learning in Comprehensive English (I) and Comprehensive English (II), adhering to the concepts of Outcome-based Education (OBE) and Production-oriented Approach (POA) to design course content and activities. The aim of this study is to present a case analysis of blended learning in action and to demonstrate how it can improve students' cross-cultural and humanistic qualities, as well as their language abilities. This study seeks to answer the following four core questions based on the case analysis:

- 1) How are teaching and learning materials selected and customized to ensure appropriateness for English majors at different proficiency levels?
- 2) What are the teaching and learning activities of different challenges in blended learning, and how do these activities contribute to the development of students' comprehensive English capabilities?
- 3) How is blended learning integrated with the flipped classroom to promote students' critical thinking skills and develop their values?
- 4) How are students' performance and progress tracked and evaluated during the different stages of blended learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1. An Overview of Blended Learning

Transformation of learning environments in higher education settings for an increasingly electronic world is key to ensuring that the benefits are fully realized [6]. As stated by Hicks et al. [7] (p. 143), there are demands for universities to "provide for a larger and more diverse cross-section of the population, to cater for emerging patterns on educational involvement which facilitate lifelong learning and to include technology-based practices in the curriculum".

The recent two decades has witnessed the promising development of blended learning all over the globe. In 2002, the editor of *The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* predicted that approximately 80-90% of higher education courses would become blended in the future [8]. Later, Whitelock & Jelfs [9] introduced a special issue on

blended learning in the journal *Educational Media*, underscoring the call for papers that explore the three major dimensions of this topic:

- 1) the integrated combination of traditional learning with web-based online approaches (drawing on the work of Black et al. [10]);
- 2) the combination of media and tools employed in an e-learning environment;
- 3) the combination of a number of pedagogic approaches, irrespective of learning technology use (drawing on the work of Driscoll [1, 11]).

Obviously, blended learning aims to make full use of the Internet and optimize various pedagogic approaches, by means of which students' learning experience can be innovated and learning efficiency can also be elevated.

Allen et al. [12] reported that by 2004 45.9% of U.S. undergraduate institutions have already offered blended courses. As Internet technology and educational technologies fast progressed, there has been an "explosive growth of blended learning", and blended learning boasts of a potential to become the "new normal" in higher education [13]. In addition, scholars and educators also attempted to survey how blended learning was adopted at different stages of course delivery. For example, Graham et al. [14] examined six U.S. institutions of higher education at various stages of blended learning and proposed a framework to assist administrators to effectively implement blended learning.

Blended learning has also attracted great attention from education policy-makers, scholars and educators in China. It was not until 2010 that the Chinese State Council decided to accelerate the integration of the three networks, namely, telecommunications network, cable television networks, and computer networks. Since then, the Internet penetration rate has doubled and the scale of Internet users has also expanded significantly. With the issue of "Action Plan for Education Informatization" by the Ministry of Education in China in the years 2012, 2016 and 2018, the era of "Internet + College Education" has really arrived in China, promoting the application of blended learning in higher-learning education.

In 2004 and 2005, Professor He Kekang from China proposed a blended teaching model in China, which combined conventional classroom teaching with e-learning mode to maximize the benefits of both teaching methods. He viewed blended learning as a student-centered approach where teachers function more like designers [15, 16]. This combination of online and offline teaching, also known as hybrid teaching, has been widely implemented by far in various colleges and universities throughout China.

According to the report by Liang Wenhua et al. [17], research on blended learning for non-English major students in China focused on analyzing concepts and network platform systems from 2006 to 2015, with relatively general goals. From 2016 to 2018, research directions became more refined and the research focus shifted to independent learning, teaching effects, classroom teaching, and clear teaching objectives. The focuses expanded further during 2019-2020 to include teaching materials, internet resources, learning

strategies and motivation, and teacher-student interaction, which can affect the effectiveness of blended teaching. Despite progress, the practice of blended teaching in China has not yet been widespread, and there is a need to profile the existing outcomes and present representative case analyses of blended learning practice in various disciplines.

2.2. Blended Learning Practice

With the combination of synchronous verbal and asynchronous written communication in the context of a cohesive community of inquiry, blended learning offers a distinct advantage in supporting higher levels of learning through critical discourse and reflective thinking.

As Heterick & Twigg [18] pointed out, blended learning requires course redesign in respects of student learning objectives, course content, learning resources, course staffing, task analysis, and student evaluation. In blended learning, the good use of technology and online learning platform can make the teaching tailored to the student learning needs and also meet the requirements of an institution.

In 2021, Lv Xiaomin conducted an experiment to test the effectiveness of blended teaching among students. The results showed that most students believed that blended teaching allowed them to learn anytime, anywhere, and on any occasion [19]. Additionally, in an interview with students, Lv Xiaomin [19] discovered that some students found that learning on the MOOC platform helped to consolidate their knowledge, extend their learning content, and increase their interest in learning. Others believed that blended learning improved their ability to discover, analyze, and solve problems. Moreover, this study emphasized that blended learning with the use of MOOCs offered students more opportunities for interaction, encouraged proactive learning, and brought about the benefit of receiving feedback from peers.

Li Yuzhen et al. [5] conducted a literature review of research on blended learning in the teaching of English for non-English majors in China, and found that students expressed a higher degree of satisfaction with blended learning, compared with that of traditional teaching method. Ren Qingmei [20] also found that in blended learning students' overall level of English listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities have been greatly improved, especially the writing ability. More importantly, personalized and collaborative learning during the process of blended learning can help reduce students' anxiety of English learning, stimulate students' enthusiasm and interest in learning, build up a stronger sense of self-efficacy in students' mind, enhance students' learning motivation, and encourages students to attempt different learning strategies such as self-regulation, naturalization, cooperation [20]. In addition, Zhang Dan [21] designed questionnaires to explore the role of blended learning in cultivating students' critical thinking ability, and found that students' higher-order cognitive ability can be significantly improved in self-learning and flipped classrooms; moreover, students' teamwork spirit, empathy thinking ability, and concept of collaboration have been enhanced.

Moreover, Liu Xiaomei [22] introduced the blended learning practice in English listening and speaking courses for non-English majors at Beijing University of Chemical Technology, where "online independent learning", "flipped classroom" and "traditional teaching" were integrated with each other. Yang et al. [23] also presented a case of blended learning in teaching the course Daily Communication in English at Tsinghua University, and explored the fundamental guarantees, core links and basic principles of blended learning in EFL courses.

In addition to examining how blended learning has been conducted and what benefits it has provided, scholars are increasingly focused on students' feedback and evaluations of blended learning. For example, Kim et al. [24] scrutinized the affective element of blended learning evaluations, identifying major parameters to assess whether blended learning: (a) generated enthusiasm and motivates students, (b) encouraged student discussion, (c) was open to constructive criticism, (d) provided assistance outside of class, (e) was considerate of students' needs, (f) fostered equality among students and respects them, and (g) exhibited positive attitudes towards the course and the students.

Later, Stewart et al. [25] developed and validated an assessment instrument specifically targeted to web-based learning by analyzing approximately 1,400 responses from multiple institutions and instructors. Employing principal component and maximum likelihood methods, Stewart et al. [25] identified seven factors that underlie students' evaluation of online learning: web page appearance, hyperlinks and navigation, technical issues, online application, class procedures and expectations, content delivery, and instructor and peer interaction.

In essence, there is a qualitative difference between teaching online and merely putting a course online. To practice blended learning in an effective way, instructors shall recognize the real difference between using technology as a delivery mechanism and using it as a communications medium. The impetus for blended learning depends partly on a growing acceptance that higher educational and training programs should be student-centered and partly on the need to develop enhanced efficiency in the provision of teaching. The current challenge for administrators, policymakers, and faculty of higher education institutions seems to acknowledge and accept that there have been significant and irreversible changes in societal demands, funding shortfalls, competition, technological innovations, and student demographics.

3. Basics of Comprehensive English Courses

3.1. Target Students

Comprehensive English (I, II) is designed for freshmen of English major, whose English proficiency is measured by grades 4-5 against China Standards of English released by the Ministry of Education of China in 2018. Typically, these students can read English passages of moderate difficulty,

share their opinions orally or in writing, but may rely on common 2,000 English words, according to West's [26] list of common words, and seldom use more advanced vocabulary. Their sentence structure may also lack variation, demonstrating weaknesses in using more complex syntax. Additionally, these students' English language knowledge and comprehensive skills are often insufficient, especially when given assignments related to comparing English and Chinese culture, and translating between both languages. As a result, their cross-cultural abilities need improvement. Furthermore, these students come from diverse regions of China, with noticeable regional differences in English proficiency.

The target audience of the course is students aged between 17 to 19, who are characterized by their active thinking and creativity, a strong desire for knowledge acquisition, and a keen interest in hot issues, news reports, and emerging technology. They possess a certain level of information literacy and are comfortable with Internet-assisted learning, making it easy for them to adapt to blended learning. However, despite being well-versed in gathering information online, most students struggle with effectively analyzing and processing the given information. Concerning assignments, students are open to both individual and group tasks, and online and offline exercises and activities. Although students create their own study plan, it is often poorly designed and difficult to follow, resulting in confusion regarding the learning modes and relevant requirements of blended learning. Therefore, there is a pressing need to enhance their ability to develop reasonable study plans and improve their time management skills.

3.2. Course Description

Instructors of Comprehensive English courses are adopting a question-driven approach and using blended learning to design teaching content, learning activities, flipped classroom sessions, exercises, and quizzes, to deliver courses in a more engaging and interactive format. This is being done with the goal of achieving four key objectives: language, content, capacity, and value, which are integral to the overall teaching and learning experience.

The primary objective of Comprehensive English courses is to improve students' basic English language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, which in turn will enhance their overall command of the language. Additionally, the course aims to develop students' comprehensive English abilities, allowing them to effectively communicate and articulate their thoughts and ideas.

Furthermore, the course is designed to provide students with an in-depth understanding of the text content while also highlighting the social implications and cultural connotations conveyed within. To achieve this, the course employs genre-based writing practices to enhance students' writing skills and ensure that they can effectively express themselves in writing.

Meanwhile, the teaching of Comprehensive English seeks to enhance students' cross-cultural abilities, critical analysis

skills, consciousness of linguistic expressions, and their problem-solving prowess. Throughout the course, students will also practice making effective use of the Internet, big data, and various corpora to gather and process information, developing their information literacy and self-study skills.

Moreover, the course aims to cultivate students' sense of social responsibility and instill a sound system of values and perspective within their mindset. To achieve this, students will be guided to compare and contrast Chinese and Western cultures, better grasp the intricacies of Chinese language and culture, and leverage their professional knowledge and skills to effectively convey China's unique story. Ultimately, students will emerge from the course with a robust set of capabilities and a well-rounded outlook on the world around them.

3.3. Teaching Philosophy

The instructors of Comprehensive English courses are dedicated to the teaching idea of "Outcome-based Education" (OBE) and follow the principle of the "Production-oriented Approach" (POA) in their classes. POA was developed by Professor Wen Qiufang's teaching team [27, 28, 29] and is an EFL teaching methodology that incorporates Chinese characteristics. The POA approach is composed of three central components: "Motivating-Enabling-Assessing." In keeping with the teaching idea of OBE and the principle of POA, the instructors serve as intermediaries while the students are the focal point of the classroom, responsible for performing and demonstrating their learning.

The "production-oriented approach" or POA was based on Wen Qiufang's [27] research on EFL teaching in China. POA system is divided into three parts: teaching philosophy, teaching hypothesis and teaching procedure, as shown in Figure 1 below.

As depicted in Figure 1, the "Teaching Hypothesis" assumes that teaching activities should be motivated by output, enabled by input, and realized in the form of selective learning, thus breaking the conventional input-output course design. Consequently, POA prioritizes the output-input-output order and takes output as the primary goal of lecturing a lesson. According to the teaching philosophy and hypothesis underpinning POA, the core of teaching involves the "Motivating-Enabling-Assessing" process, wherein instructors function as mediators and coordinators. During the "Motivating" session, instructors create communicative scenarios with "potential communicative value" to make students cognizant of their linguistic limitations, stimulating the potential dynamics of language development [30, 31]. In the process of "Enabling", instructors provide students with appropriate input materials aligned with output tasks, guiding them towards selective learning and promoting task output. The "Assessing" phase includes immediate or delayed evaluation of students' performance after engaging in production tasks in or out-of-class, ensuring their online/offline participation, checking learning outcomes, and improving the quality of teaching and learning.

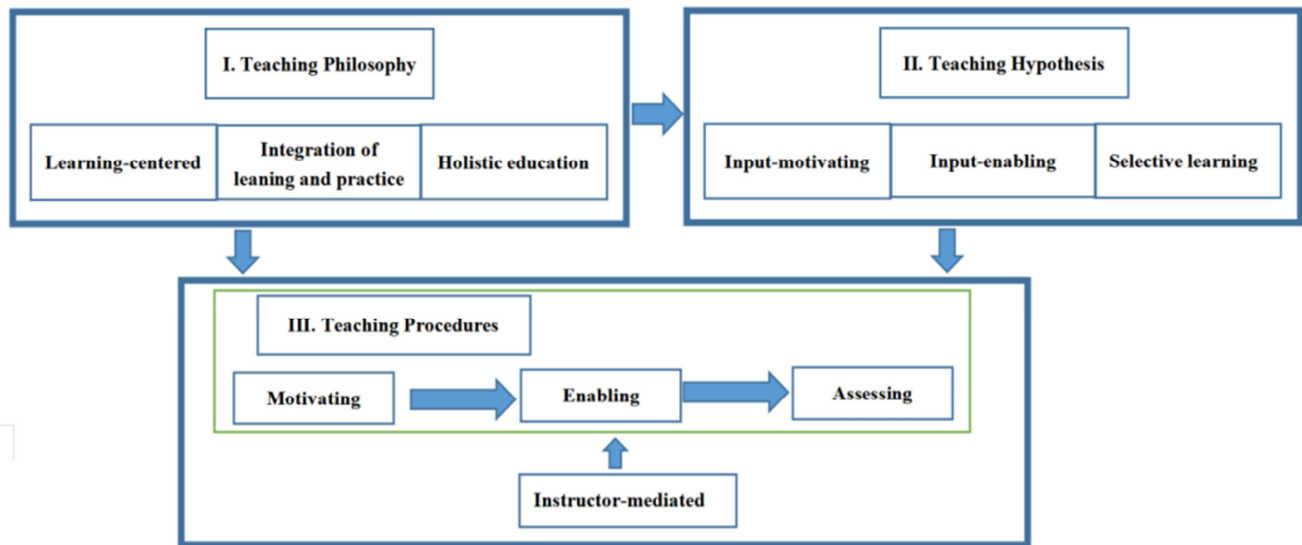


Figure 1. POA system (quoted from Wen Qiufang, 2015: 548).

4. Blended Learning in Comprehensive English Courses

4.1. Course Design

According to Bishop & Verleger [32], student-centered learning is the practicing of a set of pedagogical theories that include active learning, peer-assisted learning, and collaborative learning. Active learning requires that students be engaged in meaningful learning activities [33] and that students be accountable for their own learning [34]. According to Nederveld & Berge [35], several opportunities for peer-assisted learning exist in flipped classrooms, in both class activities, such as collaboratively solving problems, cooperating to complete projects, and out-of-class activities by means of technology, such as discussion boards, social network sites, and so on.

The Comprehensive English courses are delivered through a blended learning mode. In China, there are various online learning platforms available, such as MOOCs and customized tools offered by different universities and colleges. To conduct the hybrid teaching of Comprehensive English, the instructors have utilized Xuexitong (literally meaning “facilitating learning”), an online learning tool known for its high efficiency and user-friendliness and widely used in many educational institutions in China.

To comply with the course syllabus, at least one-third of the teaching hours are conducted online during each semester, during which time students are assigned various online and offline tasks. For student performance evaluation, both online and offline learning carry equal weightage, maintaining a 1:1 ratio.

Blended learning’s “result-oriented” and “production-oriented” approach is crucial for the Comprehensive English courses. The course delivery

procedure follows the “Motivating-Enabling-Assessing” model based on Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and Production-oriented Approach (POA) principles. The process involves setting “unit outcomes” based on the themes and content of each unit, such as mastering specific language points like the subjunctive mood, and improving writing skills, for instance, argumentative writing. The “semester outcomes” are then established, ensuring that students develop comprehensive language skills inclusive of writing passages of diverse genres, acquiring basic translation skills, and analyzing texts critically. The reverse design framework is applied to structure the course and achieve both the periodic and ultimate outcomes. During the different stages of Motivating-Enabling-Assessing, students interact with the course material and each other, gradually achieving the desired outcomes.

Delivered under the principle of OBE and following POA, Comprehensive English courses are instructed under the following framework as shown in Figure 2 below, covering different procedures of online and offline learning.

As illustrated in Figure 2, for each unit the course delivery procedure mainly includes two rounds of online and offline blending. Each unit consists of two texts, Text I as the reading focus, and Text II for self-study. During the initial phase of online learning, the Lead-in Module is conducted, which entails providing background information, cultural notes, and a communicative scenario. This module requires students to experience the scenario individually or as a team, identify communication problems, and devise possible solutions while also conducting a general reading of Text I.

After this online learning period, which lasts roughly one and an half hours, students switch to offline classroom learning, namely the Detailed Reading Module. Instructors initially prompt students to review the previous online learning session’s content before delving into the detailed reading of Text I. During classroom learning, instructors encourage students to conduct a critical reading of the text,

identify the implicit meanings behind words and expressions, and engage in discourses on topics related to the unit's theme.

The initial round of blended learning includes motivating and assessing students' learning progress.

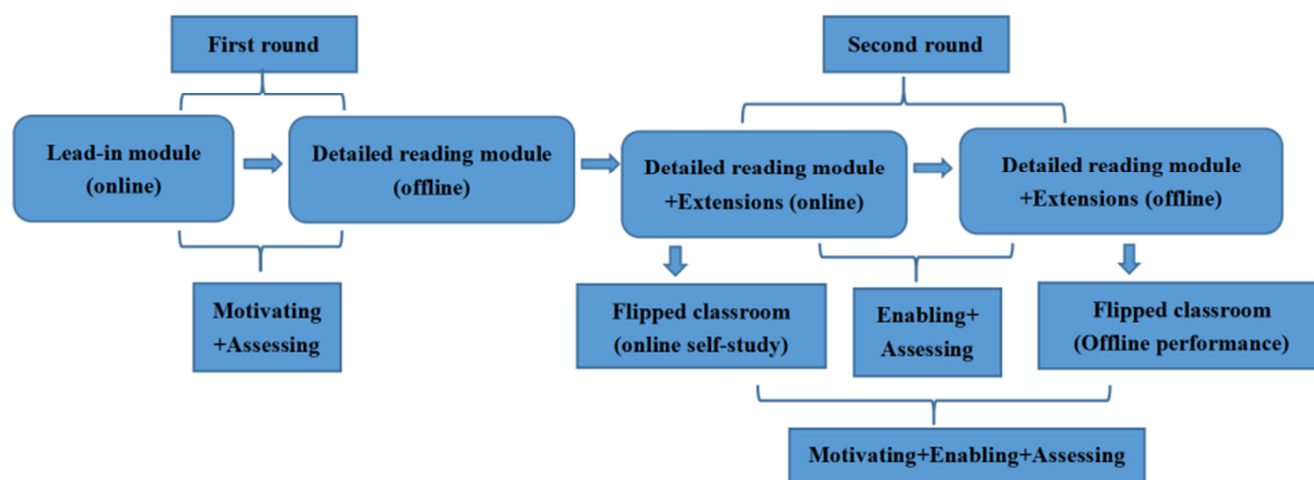


Figure 2. Framework of blended learning for Comprehensive English courses.

The second round of blended learning is then implemented, with an additional one and an half hours allocated for online learning. During this phase, students continue to read Text I in a question-driven mode and are taught to conduct a critical analysis of the text with the assistance of web resources and internet tools. This phase is then followed by another classroom session, consisting of four to six teaching hours. During offline learning, instructors begin by commenting on students' completion of online assignments before engaging them in a Question-and-Answer session aimed at facilitating deeper analysis of the online discussion topics. Additionally, detailed reading of the text is continued, and enabling and assessing practices are carried out.

In addition to detailed reading and critical thinking activities during the classroom learning session, various forms of extensions are incorporated into the course, including the Extension Module, which includes genre-based writing, cultural focus, translation, and flipped classroom activities. Typically, at least three different flipped classroom activities are designed in each semester, which are specific to the topic and format of the course. Topics are selected from a given unit, and the format involves group work such as group discussion, team presentations, debates, role-playing, surveying, and dubbing. The Extension Module and Flipped Classroom utilize motivating, enabling, and assessing practices. After two rounds of blended learning, each teaching unit is complete, and students are recommended appropriate extended exercises to be finished online, which serves to intensify their English proficiency and prepare them for the English proficiency test required of English majors conducted in their sophomore year.

4.2. Blended Learning in Different Modules

As Figure 2 shows above, "Motivating-Enabling-Assessing" is the core element of the teaching procedure in POA. Students will get input and then generate the corresponding output before the offline class, which involves both individual and group tasks. According to this POA process, students get more

motivation and learn more effectively. Various class forms prepare students for in-depth thinking about what they have learned and whether they are able to put their knowledge into practice. To better help students to achieve this learning objective, flipped class activities are designed in Comprehensive English course, covering group discussion, team presentation, debating, and so on. The following section presents in detail the different modules in blended learning.

4.2.1. Lead-in Module

The Lead-in Module serves as an introductory activity to each unit and is primarily conducted online while serving as the starting point of the thematic exploration. According to the POA concept, the Lead-in Module's start-up activities should act as a learning drive and simulate communication scenarios that align with the given unit's theme. Various communicative scenarios are designed for this course, such as dialogues, speeches, group discussions, and information sharing.

To facilitate familiarity and understanding of the relevant background information, written materials, as well as multimodal discourses, are provided on the online learning platform Xuexitong, including audio clips, video clips, and pictures. During the simulated communication activities, students are encouraged to identify potential or existing problems and challenges while proposing possible solutions. Their participation and response to potential problems represent an outcome of motivation closely followed by the "Enabling" process.

Take as an example the unit titled "Whatever Happened to Manners?". This unit specifically focuses on the topic of manners. During the Lead-in Module, the instructor created a communication scenario on the online platform, which pertained to daily etiquette among family members. The scenario sparked a brainstorming session about saying thank you, or otherwise, among the students. Some of the questions posed to the students for brainstorming included: "Do you believe it's necessary to say 'thank you' to your parents when

they do something for you?” and “Is it necessary for them to say ‘thank you’ to you if you’ve done them a favor?”

The students were proactive in their approach to the topic, sharing their perspectives and interacting with one another through posting and replying to each other’s opinions online. Figure 3 below illustrates the students’ views about manners between family members in word cloud format.



Figure 3. Word cloud of students' brainstorming.

As can be seen from Figure 3, the high-frequency words include “thank you”, “should/necessary”, “express/say”, “respect/love”, which indicates that students were provoked to express their attitudes towards good manners. They typically regarded good manners as necessary, a way to demonstrate respect and love, and a must-have. These discussions about manners served to motivate students to consciously reflect on people’s awareness of good manners in their everyday lives,

which is often a good virtue that goes unnoticed in modern society. Moreover, while students responded to each other’s opinions towards saying thank you to family members, they were also assessing each other by means of giving a “like” to the viewpoints, that is, mutual assessment between students.

After brainstorming, students were guided to watch online recommended movie clips and famous quotes about “etiquette”, which can enlighten them to think about the social function and significance of “etiquette”. Finally, students were expected to watch short videos about cultural differences in etiquette by using body language, titled “Body Language: Do’s and Don’ts”. After watching the video clip, students started an exploratory learning to complete Production 1: search information about body language cultural differences in body languages and then try to account for cultural differences under discussion. This Production in blended learning aims to train students’ skill in searching and processing useful information to base their critical thinking on. Students’ completion of this assignment was evaluated by the instructor via the online learning platform, where comments and suggestions were offered for individual students.

In addition, students were motivated to think further about the issue of etiquette in daily communication, especially in cross-cultural communication. To achieve the objective of knowing how to conduct successful cross-cultural communication, Production 2 was designed (shown in Figure 4 below).

Step 1: Watch the video clip on "How To Speak With Good Manners In English".

Step 2: Work with your partner(s) to role play an episode in English, with requirements as follows:

- 1) Each group is comprised of 2-4 students, each member having a role to play;
- 2) The episode needs to show a conversation or a plot where the theme of good manners in our daily life is highlighted. For example, the group may shoot a video on dos and don'ts on certain occasion.
- 3) The names of the members need to be marked and the video duration is better to be shorter than 6 minutes.

Figure 4. Direction for Production 2: Making a video clip.

As is shown in Figure 4, students were divided into different groups upon their own will, for example, a group of students living in the same dormitory, and cooperated to shoot a video on the topic of “etiquette”. The duration of each video clip is around 6 minutes. And students shall submit their cooperative work via Xuexitong before the deadline.

The discussions on manners motivated students to delve deeper into the issue of etiquette in daily cross-cultural communication. To achieve the objective of understanding how to conduct successful cross-cultural communication, Production 2 was implemented. As displayed in Figure 4, students voluntarily organized themselves into different groups, such as students living in the same dormitory, and collaborated to create a video on the topic of “etiquette”. The duration of each video clip was approximately six minutes, and students submitted their collaborative work through Xuexitong before the deadline. In addition to assessing their

videos, the instructor provided comments and offered tips for cross-cultural communication via the online platform. Moreover, the final video clips were played during the offline class break to further enhance students’ motivation to learn about etiquette in cross-cultural communication.

In conclusion, the Lead-in Module emphasizes both Motivating and Assessing. Its design of motivating activities and assigned online production tasks help to answer the first research question on how to appropriately organize and design various learning activities with different challenges to meet the target students’ learning needs and adapt to their learning characteristics. By participating in the simulated communicative scenario and studying the relevant learning materials, students’ curiosity and interest in the topic of “etiquette” were fully stimulated. Furthermore, the output-oriented activities presented a certain level of challenge, which keep the students enthusiastic about

exploring the issue of etiquette in a social context. All in all, students are well-prepared and motivated by the factors presented and completed within the Lead-in Module, making them ready to move on to the next modules, Detailed Reading Module and Extensions Module.

4.2.2. Detailed Reading Module

After participation in the start-up activities online, students are supposed to have a preliminary understanding of the major topic or theme of a given unit, but activities such as close reading of texts, in-depth topic interpretation as well as critical thinking of certain issues still need to be deepened through offline learning.

In the offline classes, the students begin by presenting their output in the form of an oral activity. For each unit, two or three such oral activities are organized, with two or three students presenting their opinions via dialogue, debate, or role-playing scenarios that are central to the unit's topic. The oral activity is part of the "Enabling" process, which is designed to encourage students to participate actively.

Once the students finish presenting their oral performance, the instructor initiates interaction amongst the students through a Question-and-Answer session. This is where peer comments are encouraged, and interaction amongst the students is facilitated. Meanwhile, the students are required to evaluate their peers, accounting for 40% of the final grade, while the instructor performs a comprehensive evaluation accounting for 60% of the final mark.

Then the instructor will lead the students from oral activities to the detailed reading of the texts, normally Text I of each unit. With an attempt to answer the second research question concerning the arrangement of the teaching and learning activities of different challenges in blended learning and how these activities contribute to the development of students' comprehensive English capabilities, the instructor processes the teaching materials with the aid of Xuexitong and other multimedia tools such as PowerPoint and Whiteboard, and designs various interactive activities such as question-and-answer, sight translation, race of answering, voting, in order to make students involved in the whole process of course delivery. Normally, the arrangement of classroom activities and teaching procedures in this course follows the principle of being based on yet much more profound than what the teaching materials tend to be.

When guiding students to perform close readings of texts, the instructor places a greater emphasis on what is inferred rather than the words and expressions themselves. To reach the language objectives of the course, the instructor focuses more on the analysis of the narrative structure or arguments of a text from the lexical, semantic, and discourse levels. Classroom interaction is geared towards the students as the central focus and question-driven. This is achieved through strategies such as paraphrasing key sentences or long-and-difficult sentences and translation from the text, pair work on designated topics, watching video clips on the topic of the discussion, and brainstorming on the relevant social issues.

The offline instruction of the course not only satisfies students' need to strengthen their grasp of English language essentials, but also adapts to various learning styles and proficiency levels with regard to students' unique learning characteristics. Through multimodal instruction, coupled with the instructor's mediation and guidance, students are motivated to carry out critical or positive discourse analysis. The students' performances in individual or pair work exercises are quickly evaluated, and the instructor responds with comments on their contribution to various classroom activities. Thus, the "Enabling" and "Assessing" components of offline learning are front and center, incorporating the content objectives of the course.

4.2.3. Extensions Module

Apart from the close reading of texts, extensions are also fundamental as they complement text analysis and topic elaboration. Based on the content of each unit, it is the instructor's responsibility to encourage the students to probe into the narrative and the related issues, and organize classroom activities that effectively integrate the extensions with the textual analysis.

This approach helps to facilitate critical thinking and enables students to gain a comprehensive understanding of the given topic. Furthermore, through proper extensions, students can gain a better understanding of the real-world implications of the content being studied. Hence, the instructor must ensure that the extensions planned are relevant to the subject matter of the text while accomplishing the goal of complementing the text analysis.

Take as an instance the teaching activity of genre-based writing in the Extensions Module. Comprehensive English teaching materials consist of various themes and texts of different genres, including argumentation, narration, and exposition. In the writing session of each unit, blended learning is employed. An introductory material related to a writing skill or topic is uploaded online to the extensions module, and students are required to conduct self-study before the offline class. These materials, in the form of short videos or written texts, help students gain preliminary knowledge of a given genre. During the Enabling process, the instructor can better utilize the offline class hours to guide students in understanding and mastering writing skills of different genres. Students are then assigned a writing task, genre-based writing, through the online platform. In this extension module, performance evaluation of students' compositions is conducted through peer evaluation (40%), the instructor's evaluation (40%), and the instructor's evaluation of one student's assessment of the other's writing (20%). Before the peer evaluation, the instructor provides an evaluation sheet with parameters such as lexical and syntactic variety, a clear position, and convincing arguments. This flexible and reasonable evaluation mechanism improves students' analytic ability as they make constructive comments on their peers' work and enables them to critically appraise given opinions or issues. Moreover, this mechanism of performance evaluation encourages students to participate in the learning activity

wholeheartedly, as they are assessed based on their outputs.

In addition, instructors assign both obligatory tasks or exercises and optional tasks during the online learning sessions. For optional tasks, students of different language proficiency can choose to finish online either all or part of the exercises before different deadlines. In brief, students' differences in language capacities, time arrangement and learning preferences are taken into consideration when the instructor designs various kinds of learning activities in the process of blended learning. In a sense, blended learning is conducive to optimizing students' learning effects in that this learning mode enables the instructor to tailor tasks to students' learning characteristics and leave students certain flexibility to complete the assignments in according to their conforming timetables.

The course emphasizes the development of students' world outlook and values, and aims to guide students to consciously pay attention to and analyze social issues such as social development, cultural differences between China and Western countries, and more. This teaching objective is achieved through various components of blended learning.

The instructor incorporates a wide range of topics in each teaching unit for critical thinking and discussion, covering the latest hot issues, state-of-the-art information technology, the well-being of Chinese people, the role of college students in modern society, cross-cultural communication, and other relevant topics. Students are driven and enlightened by the narrative of "how to tell China's stories in English," inspiring them to tell China's stories from different perspectives and sharpen their critical thinking abilities.

Through brainstorming, lecturing, debating, and other activities during both online and offline learning, students take part in the activities and the evaluate each other's performance in various activities to optimize their learning experience. Moreover, the instructor evaluates their performance in a reasonable manner so that formative assessments of each student can be conducted.

By completing various project-based tasks, students not only acquire knowledge of the English language but also consolidate their capacities in speaking, listening, writing, and translating. More importantly, they build a sound worldview and form a virtuous circle of cognition-practice-cognition. For example, while delivering a unit on global warming, the instructor guides students to search for information on the United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC), including important agreements and protocols signed by Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), China's commitments to curbing carbon emissions, and contributions to fight against climate change. Relevant video clips featuring significant speeches on climate change are also shared online with students, encouraging them to brainstorm ideas on what college students can do individually to address climate change in the age of information and technology. Through relevant online and offline exercises, students' analytic abilities and critical thinking capacities can be further developed.

4.2.4. Flipped Classroom

Flipped or inverted classroom is a new and popular instructional model, in which activities traditionally conducted in the classroom, such as content presentation, become home activities, and activities normally constituting homework become classroom activities [33, 36]. In the flipped classroom, the teacher helps the students instead of merely delivering information, while the students become responsible for their own learning process and shall govern their own learning pace [37]. Since classroom time is not used to transmit knowledge to students by means of lectures, the teacher is able to engage with students by means of other learning activities such as discussion, solving problems proposed by the students, hands-on activities, and guidance. Today, the concept of the flipped classroom has been realized in many different disciplines, including math, social sciences, humanities, and in colleges and universities around the world [38].

Emphasis is put on project-based learning in the delivering process of Comprehensive English. To better implement project-based learning and help students put their comprehensive knowledge of English language into practice, flipped classroom is designed in accordance with the theme of a given unit. Flipped classrooms incorporate collaborative learning. Since class-time is not used to deliver knowledge by means of lectures in flipped classrooms, teachers can conduct collaborative small group activities to interact with the students [36].

In Comprehensive English courses, three different types of flipped classroom activities are usually designed within one semester, each activity comprised of one online teaching hour and two offline teaching hours. The flipped classroom activity is composed of two parts - online self-study and discussion that emphasizes "Motivating" and "Enabling," and the offline performance of the assigned activity.

In each flipped-class activity, students are grouped based on their language proficiency and personality. During online learning, students watch short videos, read text materials related to the established activity themes, and complete tasks such as open-question discussions, information searches, and video watching. Video clips elaborating different forms of group work are also included, which familiarize students with the specific offline activities in the classroom. These activities primarily include group discussion, team presentation, debating, dubbing, and more.

In the offline module, each group of students must be well prepared for their assigned cooperative work. During their performance, members of other groups are invited to evaluate the performers using a specific evaluation sheet that lists a variety of parameters with different weightages. These include "Content" (subject knowledge, 30%), "Group Behavior" (15%), "Body Language" (10%), "Facilitation" (10%), "Creativity and Originality" (5%), and more. Peer evaluation accounts for 40% of the grades, while the instructor's evaluation accounts for 60%.

Upon completion of each group's performance, the instructor provides students with constructive feedback and

tips for improvement. This approach is highly effective in providing a comprehensive learning experience by enabling students to engage in activities that foster teamwork, creativity, and critical thinking.

Essentially, in flipped classrooms, students are responsible for their own learning, participate in small-group activities, learn in an active mode, and the teacher assumes a facilitator role. Because lecture-based knowledge delivery is not part of flipped classrooms, instructors can create collaborative small-group activities to interact with students [36]. According to Tucker [39], flipped classrooms allow students to use class time to work together and engage in collaborative learning.

By incorporating flipped classroom design into blended learning, students' self-study abilities, group cooperation, and exploratory learning are further improved. This approach leads to a more creative and intellectual environment that encourages students to take ownership of their learning and work collaboratively, resulting in enhancing self-motivation and self-driven learning. Flipped classrooms significantly increase student engagement and alter their approach to learning by shifting the traditional paradigm of in-class instruction to independent learning with classroom-time devoted to problem-solving activities and a deeper understanding.

4.3. Student Performance Evaluation and Feedback

Blended learning enables the instructor to dynamically and effectively track students' learning effects and provide timely feedback to students when they finish different tasks and perform in different contexts. Following the outcome-based education idea and the teaching philosophy of production-oriented approach, the teaching of Comprehensive Course lays stress on the formative assessment of students' performance, which is comprised of online and offline performance and reflected in various learning activities.

Formative assessment is guided by "outcomes" produced in various individual and cooperative learning activities. Feedback about these activities is provided offline or through the online learning platform, allowing students to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their language competence and performance while trying different methods to improve them.

Moreover, summative assessment is also employed in the form of a final examination, which takes place at the end of each semester. Students' final scores are based on the formative and summative scores in a 1:1 ratio. Comparatively, formative assessment covers a greater variety of scoring parameters with different weightages.

Table 1 below demonstrates the scoring system applied to the course, illustrating how the different elements of the course are evaluated. This approach enables teachers and students to determine areas of success and areas that require improvement, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of each student's language abilities and an effective means of measuring their overall performance.

Table 1. Scoring system of Comprehensive English courses.

Scores	Parameters	Weightage
Formative assessment (50%)	Online learning activities	20%
	Offline learning activities	30%
	Attendance (10%)	
	Oral activities (7.5%)	
	Classroom performance (5%)	
Summative assessment (50%)	flipped classroom activities (7.5%)	
	Final examination	50%

In brief, this course evaluates students' comprehensive performance in the whole process of blended learning. The combination of formative assessment and summative assessment can help the instructor to dynamically test and track students' comprehensive abilities in terms of English listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. The blended assessment takes into account the balance between overall requirements and differences between individual students, which can provide students with customized learning feedback. After knowing the feedback, students can better know their weaknesses and learn to build up their capacity of language use.

In general, the flexible and whole-process evaluation system has been widely recognized and accepted by students. According to students' feedback on instructor delivery and performance evaluation at the end of each semester, most students reported a significant improvement in their overall comprehensive English abilities through blended learning. Students particularly expressed their preference for the variety of learning activities available both online and offline.

The positive feedback from students towards blended learning in the Comprehensive English courses has been consistent for the past four semesters, as indicated in Table 2 below. This table demonstrates students' satisfaction with the blended learning approach and how it has significantly contributed to their growth in language proficiency. This positive response emphasizes that the blended learning approach adopted in Comprehensive English courses is an effective way to facilitate the acquisition of the English language and enhance language learning outcomes for students.

Table 2. Student evaluation of Comprehensive English courses.

Semesters	Courses	Students' grading of the instruction
2020-2021 (1)	Comprehensive English I	A+
2020-2021 (2)	Comprehensive English II	A+
2021-2022 (1)	Comprehensive English I	A+
2021-2022 (2)	Comprehensive English II	A+
2022-2023 (1)	Comprehensive English I	A+

Table 2 clearly demonstrates students' obvious preference towards and high-degree satisfaction with blended learning in taking Comprehensive English courses. Blended learning facilitates students to acquire more effectively the English language knowledge and sharpen their comprehensive English capacities. In addition to grading, some students also wrote down their feedback after the blended learning of Comprehensive English courses. Below lists some

anonymous feedback from students in different semesters, which is obtained from the university's website for students' evaluation of teaching quality. The feedback was written in Chinese by students and the following comments were translated by the authors of this study.

Student A: I have found this course to be an excellent source of learning. The abundance of resources combined with the well-organized teaching modules have allowed me to make significant progress in my learning. The instructor has consistently provided relevant feedback on submitted assignments, enhancing my understanding of the course material.

Student B: This course has been an ideal platform for me to express myself and enhance my communication skills. The instructor has provided opportunities for us to interact both online and offline, and has emphasized the importance of developing our critical thinking skills and comprehensive English language ability.

Student C: This Comprehensive English course is amazing. The instructor's teaching content and the various learning activities are thoroughly designed in line with the term "comprehensive." The course has surpassed my expectations with its high-quality design and delivery.

Student D: I have been extremely impressed by the new teaching mode of this course. Departing from the traditional practice of rote learning, the instructor consistently encourages us to be proactive, work together in activities, and guides us towards exploratory learning to maximize our learning outcomes.

Student E: The blended learning model of this course is perfectly tailored to my needs. The instructor's efforts in highlighting the teaching units and putting the theories into practice have been instrumental in developing my overall language capabilities.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of blended learning in the teaching of Comprehensive English courses has demonstrated that this innovative teaching mode is well-suited to students in the information age. By upholding the principles of Outcome-based Education (OBE) and adopting a Production-oriented Approach (POA) in the procedures of Motivating, Enabling, and Assessing, the teaching of Comprehensive English courses has been able to effectively cater to the diverse needs of students. Blended learning has provided opportunities for personalized learning, adaptive instruction, and critical thinking development, which are essential skills in the digital era.

Blended learning has enabled instructors of Comprehensive English courses to design diverse and abundant learning activities, both online and offline, in the four major modules, that is, Lead-in, Detailed Reading, Extensions, and Flipped Classroom. English language is not just a tool for communication, but also serves as a means for exchanging ideas, disseminating culture, and bridging cultural gaps. For Chinese students majoring in English, the ultimate objective of learning English is to command and sharpen their

comprehensive abilities to effectively communicate China's stories to the world in an appropriate and culturally sensitive manner. Blended learning is prioritized by instructors to deliver Comprehensive English, as it allows for the full utilization of its advantages, such as teaching materials selection and sharing, simulation of communicative scenarios, design of flipped classrooms, and a balanced combination of formative and summative assessments, as well as timely feedback to students. Blended learning plays a crucial role in helping students achieve this grand goal, and its potential can be harnessed to enhance the quality of English language education.

Despite the benefits of blended learning, there are certain limitations that need to be addressed. One limitation is the lack of a targeted evaluation system to assess the effectiveness of blended learning from both the instructor's and the students' perspectives. There is a need for a quantitative measurement tool that can track students' feedback on blended learning in a timely manner, providing instructors with insights into students' learning outcomes and potential suggestions for improving teaching efficiency. Additionally, more attention should be given to students' views on blended learning at different stages of their learning journey. Further efforts are needed to enhance the design of teaching content, learning activities, and coordination between online and offline learning, in order to optimize the blended learning experience for students. Continuous improvement in these areas will contribute to the advancement of blended learning in English language education.

In summary, blended learning remains a viable and innovative learning mode for students to acquire English language knowledge and, more importantly, sharpen their comprehensive English abilities. Through the appropriate use of the Internet and technologies, blended learning can effectively adapt students to the state-of-the-art educational means of the modern society. This not only enhances students' language abilities, but also broadens students' horizons and shapes their worldview in a more accurate and informed manner. Blended learning holds great potential in facilitating holistic development and preparing students for success in today's dynamic world. The findings of this study highlight the potential of blended learning as a transformative approach to English language teaching, and offer insights for educators and scholars in the field of teaching English as a Foreign Language to further enhance the quality of English education in China and beyond.

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