Chinese International Students' Learning Experience and Perceptions in Blended Courses in UK Universities

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Abstract: Blended learning has become common among higher education institutions worldwide. Despite its popularity, there remains a gap between previous research and international students' learning experiences in blended courses in UK universities under COVID-19. This study implies a survey-based approach that examined 57 Chinese students' blended learning experiences. The questionnaire incorporates the participant's motivation, learning autonomy, class participation, learning effectiveness, and overall contentment. A quantitative analysis of students' responses suggests that the participants obtain positive learner perceptions in the setting; although there is no significant correlation between English proficiency and blended learning engagement, the student with higher IELTS scores tends to act as "contributor" and "leader" in class activities, showing their active engagement in blended courses and a strong willingness to express themselves. The results of this work can provide some insights for educators, policymakers, and experts to improve the quality of blended courses in higher education so as to offer better learning experiences for international students in UK universities.

Keywords: Blended learning, higher education, learning experience, international students

1. Introduction

1.1. Blended learning in UK universities

As communication technology advances, online platform, which overcomes time and location constraints, brings a promising and challenging future to the field of education [1]. Owing to its benefits in enhancing pedagogy, widening access to learning, and cost-effectiveness, the concept of blended learning has sparked considerable attention and discussion among researchers [2]. Previous studies have looked into how blended learning and other factors relate in terms of learner motivation [3], language acquisition [4], and learners' language competency [5], while there are limited studies shed light on how higher education institutions engage with blended learning [6].

Under COVID-19, online and blended courses have widely replaced offline classroom learning in UK universities due to the benefits of learning without time and space limitations; however, university students are required to develop literacy skills continuously, which can be more challenging for international students [7]. In 2021/22, 27% of all non-EU students studying in UK universities were from Mainland China and this number has increased continuously. Mainland China sent more

students to the UK than any other overseas country [8]. Therefore, it is crucial to look into Chinese international students' learning experience of blended courses in UK universities during this period.

1.2. Learner perceptions of blended learning

Students' perceptions of their own experiences play a vital role in learning and teaching [9]. Previous researchers have reported learners' positive perceptions of the effectiveness of combining technology with education in developing language skills and cultivating communicative skills [10, 11]. However, limited studies focus on learners' perceptions of the blended learning environment [6], and little attention has been paid to Chinese learners' perceptions of blended courses in UK universities. Additionally, some scholars predicted that 80-90% of courses in higher education institutions would be blended in the future, making it the new norm [12]. As a result, in order to give a reference for future use, it is required to further investigate the implementation of blended learning in the higher education setting and assess its effectiveness from the students' perspective.

This research aimed to analyze Chinese international university students' perceptions and experience in blended learning in the UK and the correlation between English language proficiency and blended course engagement. The following research questions are addressed in accordance with the goals of this study:

1. How do Chinese international students perceive blended learning in UK universities?
2. How does English language proficiency correlate with learner engagement in blended courses?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 57 Chinese students who had experienced blended courses in UK universities participated in this study (54.39% female), with 70.18% postgraduates. The participants' English proficiency as shown in Table 1 was upper-modest, based on the IELTS scale proposed by British Council.

Table 1: The participants' IELTS scores

IELTS Scores	Skill Level	Frequency	Percentage
8	Very good user	6	10.53%
7.5		11	19.30%
7	Good user	15	26.32%
6.5		21	36.84%
6	Competent user	3	5.26%
5.5	Modest user	1	1.75%

2.2. Instrument and data collection

The researcher created and conducted a questionnaire survey based on relevant literature to investigate participants' perceptions of their blended learning experiences in UK universities [6]. The questionnaire contains 32 items, covering demographic information, learners' motivation, learning effectiveness, class participation, learning autonomy, and the overall satisfaction level. Within the five aspects, there are 14 items that require responses on the five-point Likert scale with a range of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), 12 items that require multiple-choice selections, and 1 item by filling in the blank on a form.

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants electronically via social media using a professional questionnaire platform [13]. All participants were informed of the purposes of this

research and expressed their consent. The retrieval rate was 100%, and all questionnaires were deemed valid.

2.3. Data analysis

The descriptive data was analyzed via SPSS, and the results were discussed based on the rating intervals proposed by [14], who correlated the average of each item with the degree of agreement. Based on the rating interval, 1.00-1.80 suggests strong disagreement; 1.81-2.60 denotes disagreement; 2.61-3.40 shows moderate agreement; 3.41-4.20 implies high agreement; 4.21-5.00 indicates strong agreement. Among the five aspects of the survey, learner engagement is a critical component in determining students' performance and learning outcomes, particularly in the online learning environment [15]. Control over students' own learning enhances their engagement because it changes the classroom's power structure [16]. Therefore, this study explores the correlation between learners' IELTS scores and their responses to Item 20 and Item 25.

3.   Findings and Discussion

3.1. Motivation

To investigate students' perceptions of their motivation, eight items about students' interest in educational activities and their willingness to participate in class discussions were included. These results (see Table 2) reveal that the students' high agreement on motivation's function in blended courses.

Table 2: The students' perceptions of their motivation

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
6	The online learning activities are diversified and interesting.	3.82	0.63
7	The offline flipped classroom learning activities are relevant and interesting.	4.02	0.55
10	I think the online learning is closely related to the offline classroom learning.	4.12	0.54
11	My willingness to express my ideas has increased.	4.02	0.61

Specifically, most of students agreed (63.16%) or strongly agreed (10.53%) that online learning activities are various and inspiring, among which 98.25% of participants chose "group discussion" in Item 8 as their favorite activities in blended learning, followed by "group showcase" (59.65%) and "individual presentation" (47.37%). In Item 12, regarding their favorite part, 94.74% of students chose "offline discussion" while 5.26% chose "mini-lectures"; however, nobody chose "online discussion", "peer help", "quizzes and tests", or "peer evaluation". Similarly, the participants did not show strong interest in "quizzes and tests" or "peer encouragement in the forum" for Item 13, asking about the most stimulating part of blended learning, but 77.19% of students believed "discussion topic" is the most stimulating, "mini-lectures" comes second (22.81%).

3.2. Effectiveness

The statements in this section were devised to understand the effect of different factors in blended learning from the students' perspectives. With regard to Table 3, Items 14, 15, and 16 express the EFL participants' high agreement with the effect of blended courses in improving English proficiency. Item 17 reveals that collaboration with peers plays a significant role in improving language proficiency in blended contexts.

Table 3: The student's perceptions of the learning effectiveness

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
14	Compared with conventional classroom learning, blended learning is more effective.	3.98	0.52
15	I believe my English ability has improved in a blended learning environment.	4.11	0.56
16	The variety of activities in blended learning is useful in developing my English language competence.	4.09	0.58
17	Collaboration with group members is helpful to my English learning.	4.58	0.60

In Items 18 and 19, the participants were asked about in which area they have made the most/least progress. Table 4 indicates that the students have made great progress in "professional knowledge" (61.40%), while blended learning is not effective in improving "cultural background" (91.23%).

Table 4: The student's perceptions of the progress they have made

Area	The most progress		The least progress	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Language proficiency	21	36.84%	0	0%
Culture background	0	0%	52	91.23%
Professional knowledge	35	61.40%	1	1.75%
Communicative skills	1	1.75%	4	7.02%

3.3. Engagement

Data from eight items, incorporating three Likert Scale and five multiple-choice questions, illustrated students' participation in blended learning. These items included the participants' perceptions of their roles, the teacher's roles, average learning time, and effort. The data (see Table 5) reveals that participants are satisfied with their engagement in blended learning.

Table 5: The student's perceptions of their engagement

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
23	The blended learning increased my level of involvement in previewing course content.	3.98	0.67
24	I am pleased with the effort I have put into this course.	4.04	0.57
26	I can learn at my own pace in the blended learning.	4.46	0.60

The results in Table 6 show the results of Item 20 regarding students' roles they have taken on in blended learning, explaining their active participation in classroom activities. Understanding the teachers' roles in blended learning to better support students is also significant. Concerning Item 21, "evaluator" comes first (94.74%), followed by "organizer" (75.44%), and "supporter" (70.18%); it seems that teachers offer assistance when necessary and leave enough opportunities for students to develop; there are also 29.82% of students chose "guide" and 1.75% of students chose "assistant." This result is accordant with previous research [17], which revealed the diversity of teacher roles is required in a blended setting.

Table 6: The Students' roles in flipped classroom learning

Roles	Frequency	Percentage
Participant	57	100%
Contributor	34	59.65%
Listener	33	57.89%
Collaborator	7	12.28%
Evaluator	1	1.75%

Regarding the average time investment in online learning (Item 22), 77.19% of the students spent 7-9 hours weekly, 14.04% 10-12 hours, and 8.77% 4-6 hours. The results of Item 27 show that while watching the online mini-lecture videos, 92.98% of them watched the lectures with taking notes, but 7.02% admitted that they were occupied with unrelated matters.

3.4. Learning autonomy

Regarding students' perceptions of their own learning autonomy, there are two items in this section. Table 7 indicates that students' high (M=4.07) and strong agreement (M=4.35) on blended learning provides learners with opportunities to develop autonomous learning, demonstrating that the participants consider the environment is supportive of student-centered activities, which will, in turn, facilitate autonomous learning [15].

Table 7: The student's perceptions of learning autonomy

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
28	A high degree of learning autonomy is needed in the blended learning environment.	4.35	0.58
29	I believe I can communicate effectively with the instructor in the blended learning environment.	4.07	0.62

3.5. Overall satisfaction

In the last section, participants reflected on their overall blended learning experiences and rate their satisfaction level. It is notable from Table 8 that Items 30 and 31 show the students' strong satisfaction with their learning experiences. Students' positive responses also align with the result of previous research [6].

Table 8: The students' overall satisfaction

Item	Statement	Satisfied	Unsatisfied	Unsure
30	After the blended learning experience, I am _____.	91.23%	0	8.77%
31	After the blended learning experience, my overall feeling towards face-to-face interaction in flipped classroom learning is _____.	98.25%	0	1.75%

Concerning Item 32, participants strongly agreed (M=4.21) on recommending blended learning to others since 26.32% of students strongly agreed, 68.42% agreed, and 5.26% were neutral.

Table 9: The students' overall satisfaction

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
32	I would like to recommend the blended learning to others.	4.21	0.53

3.6. The correlation between English proficiency and engagement

In blended courses, conventional instructor-centered classroom teaching is replaced by flipped learner-centered classroom learning. Accordingly, investigating students' roles in blended learning is significant to understand their engagement.

As is shown in Table 10, there is unlikely a correlation between English language proficiency and the roles of "listener" (p = 0.259), "participant" (p = 1.000), "collaborator" (p = 0.525) and "evaluator" (p = 0.066) in the flipped classroom learning. However, the role of "contributor" (p = 0.032) seems to be relevant to the participant's English proficiency, revealing that the higher the IELTS score is, the more participants perceive themselves as "contributor" in blended courses.

Similarly, the results show a significant correlation between English proficiency and the role of "leader" (p=0.000) in blended learning group work. Specifically, the participant with higher English proficiency tends to act as a "leader" in group work (IELTS Scores=6.5, N=1; IS=7, N=3; IS=7.5, N=3; IS=8, N=5). However, there is irrelevance between language proficiency and the role of "participant" (p=0.283), "stand-by" (p=0.283), "listener" (p=0.063), or "collaborator" (p=0.573)

Table 10: The correlation between English proficiency and engagement

20、In the blended learning, the roles I have taken on in the flipped classroom learning are _____.	English language proficiency
Listener	-0.152
Participant	0.000
Collaborator	0.086
Contributor	0.284*
Evaluator	0.245
25、In the blended learning experience, the roles I have taken on in group work are _____.	English language proficiency
Leader	0.502**
Participant	0.145
Stand-by	-0.145
Listener	-0.248
Collaborator	-0.076

* $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$

4. Conclusion

The present study offers insights into Chinese international students' perceptions incorporating learning motivation, learning autonomy, engagement in courses, effectiveness, overall satisfaction with blended learning in UK universities, and the correlation between English proficiency and class engagement. The results reveal students' positive attitudes towards the blended courses, in alignment with previous studies. Additionally, there is no significant correlation between English proficiency and blended learning engagement. At the same time, the participant with higher IELTS scores tends

to act as a "contributor" in flipped classroom learning and a "leader" in group work, showing their active engagement in blended courses and a strong willingness to express themselves.

However, the small sample size and single data collection approach may impact the generalization into other contexts. For future studies, they may employ a mixed method approach to understand further factors influencing Chinese students' perceptions or research into ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) approaches to enhance students' motivation in online learning environments.

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