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Attitudes and Perceptions of English as a Foreign Language Students on Blended Learning and Learner Autonomy in a Private University of China

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Abstract. Blended learning (BL) is becoming increasingly popular and a trend in higher education in the twenty-first century. The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners toward the current implementation of BL and their learner autonomy (LA) development in a private university in China. It employed a qualitative case study, and the data was collected from five undergraduate students majoring in English through interviews, observations and reflective journals. Through thematic analysis of the data, the study concluded that EFL students at this university generally held negative attitudes toward the BL model and perceived the development of LA in this model as ineffective. Four themes related to the negative attitudes and perceptions emerged. First, a shortage of time was a common issue among students, and they felt mentally and physically overwhelmed by the blended tasks. Second, there was a lack of complementarity and integration between online and face-to-face instruction in the BL model. Third, students noted a lack of support and timely feedback from teachers in the online part of the BL model. Finally, more supervision was needed in terms of student characteristics. The findings have implications for future BL curriculum design and delivery, pedagogical adjustments and support for autonomous learning. More empirical studies focusing on the pedagogical design and the cultivation of EFL learners' intrinsic motivation for autonomous English learning in the BL environment are

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essential to address the current situation.

Keywords: attitude and perception; blended learning; learner autonomy; private university

1. Introduction

Blended learning (BL) is a pedagogical approach that combines the best features of face-to-face and online instruction to provide learners with customised and flexible learning environments (Padilla Rodriguez & Armellini, 2021). In the BL model, learner autonomy (LA) is regarded as both a prerequisite and a final goal of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and plays a significant role in the successful implementation of BL (Aysha, 2020; Chen, 2022; Liu et al., 2022).

Learner autonomy (LA) refers to “a teaching/learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate their learning” (Little, 2022, p. 64). According to Little, it is a process of habit formation in which EFL learners initially use English to manage their language learning activities as much as possible, gradually developing the competency to use the target language to communicate and reflect on their language learning. However, this ideal scenario can be challenging to achieve since EFL learners often have limited access to English-speaking environments and may find it difficult to communicate in English with peers and teachers in a non-English-speaking country. Blended learning offers greater freedom and flexibility to EFL students and has been proven to be more efficient for English language learning among EFL learners. However, it also presents numerous challenges and problems in real-world practice (Dahmash, 2020; Wang et al., 2021).

In China, the BL approach is considered the most prominent among various educational reforms and is gaining popularity in higher education language learning (Wang & Nuttall, 2018). Many studies have demonstrated the positive effects of the BL approach on improving EFL learners’ English language proficiency and language skills (Chen et al., 2018; Pi, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that these findings primarily rely on samples of public university students who have shown higher levels of autonomy, diligence, and motivation in their EFL learning (Li & Morgan, 2011; Liu, 2013; Liu, 2020). Different results may emerge when considering students from private universities who receive less attention than their counterparts at state-owned universities and have been less studied (Yin, 2023). According to Li (2019), learning achievement varies greatly in the BL approach due to different types of learners. Moreover, while research on the BL model or LA has been extensive, the combination of BL and LA, as well as EFL students’ attitudes and perceptions toward the BL model and their LA development within it, especially among students in private universities in China, remains relatively underdeveloped and requires more attention.

This study aims to discover the attitudes and perceptions of EFL learners in the private universities toward the BL model and LA development in this model. In pursuing this aim, the authors conducted a study in which the development of LA

was explored within the framework of BL through a case study in a private university in Xi'an, China. Therefore, the research question guiding this study is:

What are the attitudes and perceptions of EFL learners toward the BL model and LA development in this model?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Understanding Blended Learning and Learner Autonomy

Blended learning is an educational approach that combines traditional face-to-face classroom teaching with online learning activities. The most frequently cited definition is attributed to Garrison and Vaughan (2008), which emphasised the importance of integrating the strengths of both face-to-face and online training to maximise the benefits of each instructional approach (Padilla Rodriguez & Armellini, 2021). The integration of both types of teaching is not merely a juxtaposition but rather a systematic approach that entails substantial pedagogical transformation. The implementation of BL should involve many changes, such as the shift of the teacher's role from being a controller to an organiser, the transition from focusing on task completion to content mastery, and the move from setting goals for students to fostering students' ability to independently create their objectives (Rubin & Sanford, 2018). These changes represent instructional innovations that can be enhanced by students' LA (Erin, 2019).

LA was introduced by Holec in 1981. He defined LA as the capacity to independently guide one's learning, including selecting learning objectives, materials, pace, methods, tactics and evaluation processes, among other factors. However, Little (2007) defined LA as the unconscious and involuntary functioning of language learners' cognition. These processes manifest through learners' spontaneous or unconscious activities rather than being solely driven by their intentional effort and control over their learning. This study defines LA as EFL learners' self-management of English learning within the BL environment. It involves learners' consistent effort in the EFL learning process, which is gradually developed and facilitated by the guidance of EFL teachers. Additionally, learners must recognise their responsibility in the process of EFL learning.

Erin (2019) reported that the degree of student autonomy played a crucial role in facilitating various pedagogical innovations. Studies conducted on EFL learning have shown that the use of a BL approach resulted in increased student autonomy and a greater sense of responsibility toward their learning. The implementation of BL offered an expanded range of educational opportunities within and beyond the traditional classroom setting, thus facilitating the development of LA (Aalinezhad et al., 2021; Alaidarous & Madini, 2016). LA can, thus, be regarded as both a prerequisite and a final goal of effective BL (Chen, 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021). Some teachers regarded the promotion of LA as a desirable goal and attempted to achieve it in their teaching. However, most teachers were less optimistic about the feasibility of promoting LA due to the complex factors that contribute to it, including curriculum design, societal influences and, most importantly, learner-related factors (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019).

Additionally, BL in language teaching can effectively enhance the learning motivation of EFL learners (Chen, 2020; Kim, 2017) and contribute to their academic achievement (Rankin, 2022). Specifically, BL was reported to lead to significant improvements in certain language skills, including reading (Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017; Shang, 2021), writing (Lam et al., 2018), as well as speaking and listening (Lu, 2022). Furthermore, the integration of technology in language teaching and learning was reported to enhance EFL learners' course-related activities (Wang et al., 2021). In general, most of the research has demonstrated that BL has the potential to improve the language proficiency of EFL learners and gain positive learner perceptions from learners (Bolandifar, 2017; Chen, 2020; Djiwandono, 2018; Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017; Gulnazet al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021; Yang & Kuo, 2023).

However, in other studies, there have been results showing that EFL students using the BL approach did not show a significant improvement in their proficiency and achievement level compared to the traditional EFL teaching method (Antwi-Boampong, 2020; Müller & Mildemberger, 2021; Ryan et al., 2016). Furthermore, there was no difference in students' learning performance between the two forms of teaching, as suggested by Kim & Yoon (2021), Yen et al. (2018), and Du & Fu (2016). Regarding the attitudes of EFL learners toward BL, some studies have shown positive attitudes among participants (Bolandifar, 2017; Jiang et al., 2021; Taghizadeh & Hajhosseini, 2021; Wang et al., 2021), while others have revealed negative ones (Sari, 2019; Win and Wynn, 2015). In actual practice, the proportion and content of face-to-face and online teaching can sometimes be problematic. The expected optimal combination of the two forms of teaching may sometimes end up with the worst features of both teaching forms (Bonk & Graham, 2012). Many EFL teachers do not view the online component of EFL BL as a means of fostering contact and collaboration but rather as a way of sending messages, distributing papers, and managing courses (Apandi & Raman, 2020), which can lead to students feeling isolated and demotivated. Additionally, with various learning materials and online activities, BL also poses significant challenges to EFL learners, especially in terms of LA (Wu & Luo, 2022).

2.2 Issues with Blended Learning and Learner Autonomy in China

In China, LA is specified as a significant goal in the syllabi for both English majors and non-English majors by China's Ministry of Education (MoE) (2004). However, the results have not been satisfying despite being released about 20 years ago. College EFL learners still have difficulties in managing their English learning and studying English on a voluntary basis. Recently, the adoption of BL to enhance EFL teaching in higher education was repeatedly stressed and regarded as an important predicator for the recognition of the National First-Class Undergraduate Courses by the MoE (2019, 2023) of PRC. Nevertheless, the actual implementation of the BL approach is problematic. Not every student likes to be instructed via BL model, and the teaching designs are very rigid and do not allow for flexibility in response to student needs. According to Islam et al. (2022), the design of a BL class should always cater for the different educational contexts, specific learning objectives and the subject itself. However, in China, the standards set for BL practices are the same for both public universities and private

ones, which have distinct teaching and learning environments, varying levels of EFL students, different degrees of LA among EFL learners, and disparate supporting resources (Ding & Shen, 2019; Peng, 2018). Most importantly, private university students are not the main focus for research and studies by scholars, and their requests are frequently ignored (Yin, 2023). For these reasons, adapting EFL blended instruction is essential to cater for the specific requirements of private university students in China, which entails modifying the teaching plans and pedagogical approaches rather than adhering to identical standards employed at public universities and colleges.

Moreover, the existing body of literature primarily focuses on the significant roles of LA and strategies to enhance LA in the BL environment. These studies investigate various aspects, such as the correlation between LA and language proficiency (Cheng et al., 2018; Hu & Zhang, 2017; Yang & Kuo, 2023), the significance of LA in higher education and lifelong learning (Benson & Huang, 2008; Little, 2022), and the promotion of LA among EFL and ESL students (Chen, 2022; Wang & Wang, 2016). Research on BL primarily examines its benefits and applications in practice. For example, BL can be used to develop English language skills (Hu & Zhang, 2017; Liu et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022; Liu & Liu, 2020) and improve the learning environment (Chen et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021).

However, little research has been conducted on the perceptions of EFL learners and the various challenges they face when LA is employed alongside the BL model within the EFL context, particularly within the context of private Chinese universities. There have been several studies exploring the perceptions of English learners towards the BL model and LA, but the results have been inconsistent. Some studies have shown positive perceptions among EFL students (Du & Fu, 2016; Jiang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021), whereas others have exhibited students' negative perspectives on BL (Wang, 2014; Yang & Tong, 2015). Among these studies, quantitative designs have predominated, leaving limited room for in-depth exploration through qualitative studies.

Moreover, previous studies have predominantly focused on public university students in China, where differences in academic achievements within the BL model have been observed between private and public university students (Li & Morgan, 2011; Wang et al., 2021; Zhang, 2021). Additionally, the characteristics of students vary between public and private universities due to different educational backgrounds; therefore, the instructional approach should also be adapted (Chowdhury, 2019). Hence, it is essential to explore the issue from the perspective of private universities as well. This study provides a detailed examination of the attitudes and perceptions of EFL learners towards the BL approach in EFL teaching, identifying both the benefits and drawbacks of the BL approach in developing EFL LA in a private university from the perspective of Chinese EFL learners. Building on the preceding literature, this study formulates an integrated framework of LA and BL within the Chinese EFL learning environment (see Fig. 1). In this model, LA serves as a prerequisite for BL environments, influencing the extent to which students engage with and benefit from the BL components. BL provides opportunities for EFL students to exercise autonomy. Technology

primarily refers to the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS), which act as mediators in fostering LA. For example, students use online platforms and resources to make decisions about their learning path, pace and goals. Most importantly, teachers facilitate BL experiences by providing guidance on technology use and promoting autonomy within this process.

This study will enhance the understanding of LA development in the BL model, draw attention to the needs, perceptions, and challenges private university students face, and thus to develop a better BL model that can fit this group better.

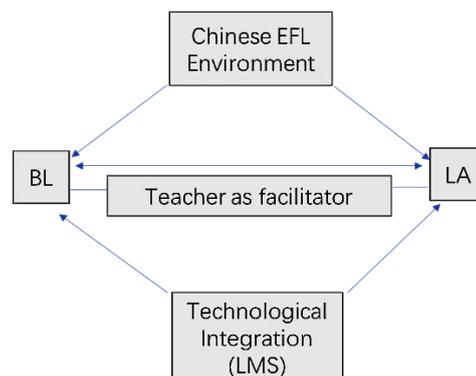


Fig. 1 Integrated framework of LA and blended learning

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, because it is effective in capturing participants' diverse perspectives and learning experiences, allowing researchers to explore complex phenomena in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study method was applied because it is better suited to investigate the beliefs, obstacles, and experiences of participants (Yin, 2018), and can assist other educators in adapting or shaping their own practices (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Moreover, the case study approach allows for a contextual understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of EFL learners. This study examined the attitudes and perceptions of EFL students toward the BL approach and LA development in a private university in China. It spanned a duration of ten weeks, during which data was collected through interviews, observations and journal reflections.

3.1 Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in a private university of Xi'an, China, which was recognised as one of the most prominent private universities in Xi'an (Li et al., 2019). The English programme here has been officially recognised as a first-class undergraduate programme by the MoE of the PRC. Participant recruitment began after receiving approval from the university's ethics committee. Five third-year participants majoring in English were purposefully recruited from a population of 1,774. at the School of English Language and Literature (SELL). This choice was made because third-year students were expected to have more extensive experience in EFL learning within the BL model. Furthermore, the five participants were identified as relatively active students in their EFL classes, nominated by their teachers. They represented normal to upper levels of English proficiency as determined by their grades in the Test for English Majors-Band 4

(TEM-4). Additionally, the third-year students at the university are known for enjoying greater autonomy in their EFL learning and tend to be more engaged in academic studies.

Four of them started learning English in the third grade of primary school, whereas only one began in the first grade. At the time the data was collected, they had all studied English for over twelve years. Table 1 provides detailed information about the participants.

Table 1 Overview of participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade	Years of English learning	Major
Mike	M	22	Junior	13	English
Lucy	F	22	Junior	16	English
Alice	F	21	Junior	13	English
Bob	M	21	Junior	13	English
Lily	F	22	Junior	12	English

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Three data collection methods—semi-structured interviews, observations and reflective journals—were employed in the data collection process. The interviews were conducted using a pre-designed interview protocol that has been validated by two experts in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) (Appendix 1). Prior to the interviews, a pilot study involving two students (Lee and Mary) was conducted to ensure that the interview protocol allowed participants to freely express their thoughts on their BL experiences. Following the pilot study, the interview language was changed from English to Chinese to enhance fluency and participant comfort. Additionally, the initial 10 questions in the interview protocol were condensed into 8 to prevent potential timeouts.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted at the university based on the interview protocol, with each session lasting between 45 to 60 minutes at the participants' convenience. Immediately after each interview, English translations were done with the assistance of member-checking. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their privacy, and the interview data were recorded. Throughout this process, the researcher frequently discussed the dataset and emerging themes with her supervisors to ensure the credibility of the study.

The second step involved observing the actual performance of the EFL students in both the face-to-face class and the online BL session, with the consent and assistance of EFL teachers. The researcher attended real classes to observe student performance and experience the BL procedures. For online data observation, the researcher primarily focused on statistical evaluations of participants provided by the Chaoxing LMS, including login frequency, time duration per session, accuracy in online practice and other forms of engagement within the LMS. This data was combined with participants' reflective journals, collected monthly throughout the

study, to assess the development of EFL LA in the BL environment. Ultimately, triangulation of these data sources addressed the research questions.

The data analysis adopted a general inductive technique to extract significant themes from the raw data (Thomas, 2006). Before conducting thematic analysis, several preliminary steps were undertaken, including collecting raw data, a thorough review of the data, summarising observed themes, conducting a consistency check and subsequently refining these themes. Before applying thematic analysis, the researchers read the raw data multiple times to assign a topic to each piece of information and then constructed a cohesive set of themes. Afterward, the researchers wrote a thorough case description for each participant and conducted member-checking to ensure the information was accurate and pertinent. Finally, a common theme for the research project was established by synthesising the findings from each interview. Additionally, it was ensured that the participants' verbatim quotations remained anonymous and consistent with their original expressions.

3.3 Blended EFL Teaching Model in This Study

The blended model for EFL teaching at SELL in this private university primarily comprises both face-to-face instruction in a physical classroom setting and online instruction through the Chaoxing LMS. This LMS serves as an online learning tool that provides supplementary classes and learning activities for EFL students, complementing the face-to-face English teaching conducted in the physical classroom. Regarding EFL teachers on the platform, they are able to monitor the entire process, including teaching materials and online instructions released by teachers, the grades of students' tasks, and the learning logs of students, among other things. This makes it possible to track and directly observe learning schedules, session durations, frequency of engagement and variations in academic performance. At SELL, the distribution of EFL instruction is mostly comprised of face-to-face and online instruction, with the former accounting for 80% of the teaching hours and the latter amounting to 20% of the total instructional time.

The courses examined in this study were among the primary subjects provided by SELL and all of these courses employed the BL approach at the time. These courses include Advanced English, Integrated English and English Public Speaking. In these courses, instructors and students meet on a variable weekly basis, as outlined in the syllabus. Each class consists of about 80 minutes of face-to-face instruction, supplemented by 10 minutes of online activities. The frequency and duration of these sessions depend on the specific attributes of the course. After the end of each class session, students receive two types of course-related assignments, one conducted in person and the other delivered online.

4. Results and Discussion

All five EFL students involved in this study expressed negative attitudes toward the BL model and held less optimistic views regarding the development of LA in such a model. This result contradicted previous research that indicated students' positive attitudes toward the BL model and the enhanced level of LA in this

context (Akbarov et al., 2018; Bolandifar, 2017; Chen, 2020; Djiwandono, 2018; Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017; Yang & Kuo, 2023; Wang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020). The themes related to students' negative attitudes and the state of their LA development in the BL environment are summarised below.

4.1 Time Aspect

The first theme relates to EFL students' sense of time shortage. All five participants expressed dissatisfaction with the current implementation of the BL model in the aspect of time distribution. They felt that their time arrangements made for the assignments were insufficient compared to those required by the curricula. The courses were still the same, but the teaching forms changed, doubling the tasks required, including both online and face-to-face assignments. According to them, time pressures were problematic and the learning results remained mostly unchanged. For instance, Lucy regarded the internet resources associated with this model as a potential hindrance to the development of LA.

I am not fond of the BL now since I have some other plans concerning EFL learning after class, and I think I can manage them well. However, so many resources and homework online are required to be finished within a certain period. In this way, the previous plan will always be interfered with, which can hardly help me develop my capacity to manage my own EFL learning. Sometimes, I felt worn out by this kind of teaching style. I prefer to have face-to-face EFL teaching instead of the BL model.
(Lucy, Interview)

Alice presented an additional concern that complemented the problems of blended EFL based on the experiences of her peers. As a monitor in her class, she was responsible for distributing subject-specific presentations to different groups, as instructed by EFL teachers.

Sometimes, assigning presentations to learning groups in the BL model in our class is difficult. It seems that our classmates are more in favour of the traditional teacher centred EFL classes, and they are not willing to cooperate in a team doing presentations or preparing for the new lessons. If they have to work together as a team and perform on the stage, they would rather take turns to work on one's own in order to save time. (Alice, Interview)

As for Mike, the complaint primarily stemmed from the excessive workload of online assignments and quizzes, which was time-consuming, but ineffective.

So many resources online should have facilitated the EFL learning process, but the fact is that our classmates are always overwhelmed by the resources. There are many blended courses at present, and each asks us to finish them on time...it is a kind of mandatory activity, but most of the students are not willing to do it by themselves...BL is flexible, but there are always activities and lectures arranged for us to attend, and online resources are a great burden on us, forcing us to complete tasks carelessly.
(Mike, Interview)

Additionally, Lucy and Mike shared a common attribute. Both of them passed the Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4) during the fifth semester of their

collegiate studies, as the examination was rescheduled due to the occurrence of the COVID-19 outbreak. The TEM-4 examination was designed to evaluate the comprehensive language skills of second-year English major students in China. It assesses their proficiency in numerous fundamental areas, including pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse (Gan, 2019). At this university, there is a smaller proportion of students who can successfully pass the TEM-4 examination within the designated timeframe. These students are often regarded as possessing a higher level of self-discipline and autonomy. Both Lucy and Mike preferred to dedicate a significantly greater amount of time to qualification exam preparation than engaging in online coursework. Despite being tasked with preparing presentations according to the course content, students tend to rely on online resources to search for relevant materials rather than using the online resources provided by their EFL instructors. In their own words, they said:

Due to my passion for EFL learning, I rarely feel bored, so I have a long-term commitment to English learning. But considering that my career plan is to be a teacher, I will first study for the teacher certification tests and then our English courses. So, most of the time, I only learn the English courses face-to-face in class and seldom spend any time dealing with those compulsory tasks online wholeheartedly.
(Mike, Interview)

Motivation is very important in dealing with all these tasks outside the school syllabus. Because of the pressure in the job-hunting market in China, I must try my best to pass the qualification texts to earn myself several certificates before applying for a job. To pass the exams, I must find extra time to learn many things outside the class, which is a good way to develop my autonomous learning. Because of time, I do not usually deal with tasks related to my school courses. (Lucy, Interview)

From their perspective, prioritising the preparation for future employment takes precedence over engaging with online coursework. Both individuals exhibited a preference for primarily attending face-to-face English classes, allocating minimal time to their English-related coursework outside of class, particularly online assignments. Despite the mandatory nature of the task, individuals typically chose to finish it just before the deadline.

Bob, Lily and Alice did not demonstrate overt opposition to the online assignments. However, they did express their preference for face-to-face instruction and their inability to combine the two types of tasks because of time constraints. According to them, they would watch the related online explanations for more details and clarification of the complicated concepts they did not catch within the class after class. However, they did not wish to deal with anything further. In their journals, they wrote, “*I can hardly balance the two kinds of learning at the same time, and it is too difficult for me to allocate time to online learning tasks in the junior year.*” and “*Time is quite limited, so I cannot deal with all the tasks in the BL model.*”

According to the statistics observed on the Chaoxing LMS, which tracked EFL

learners' login frequency, time duration and the accuracy of online practice, the overall completion rate for English courses was not satisfactory. Initially, students were required to complete the online portion of the BL course simultaneously with the beginning of the semester. However, only a small number of students initially met this requirement and completed online assignments when receiving face-to-face instruction. Gradually, many of them began to fall behind in terms of online practices. This initial excitement was replaced by indifference after about a month, causing students' attitudes toward English learning to become mostly passive, and they struggled to keep up with the BL, both online and offline (Li, 2019). Many students only completed the online tasks just before the end of the semester when the online session was about to close and student performance assessments were about to commence. To make matters worse, the grades for online assignments, particularly objective items, were significantly higher than the grades students received in their final exams. This phenomenon raises concerns about possible cheating problems in online assessments (Uziak et al., 2018). Such issues appear to be more prevalent among students in private universities compared to public ones, emphasising the need for measures to address this practice.

The data obtained from the observations in the face-to-face instruction aligned with the conclusions elicited from the interviews. In the classroom, EFL teachers primarily focused on illustrating linguistic concepts, helping with the practical application of learned skills, engaging in interactions with students and providing helpful suggestions. The allocation of class time dedicated to online activities was significantly lower than traditional face-to-face instruction, with certain classes devoting a maximum of 15 minutes to such activities. Most teachers used internet resources as an auxiliary tool to facilitate various activities, such as managing questionnaires, posing brief questions, tracking attendance and administering online quizzes, but they did not use them to promote interaction. This is consistent with the findings of Apandi and Raman (2020) which also indicated a lack of interaction and cooperation in the blended online environment.

Based on the observations, the students learning EFL showed a greater willingness for cooperation and active participation in face-to-face classroom settings. This was evidenced by their attentiveness and engagement in the various activities and techniques used during the face-to-face lessons. The perspectives expressed in the interview sessions coincided with those conveyed in the observations, since all participants exhibited a favourable disposition towards traditional face-to-face instruction while expressing a negative stance towards the current BL approach. This corresponds with the findings of Win and Wynn (2015), where 50% of the students expressed dissatisfaction with the BL model, and three-quarters of them preferred traditional classes. However, this contradicts previous research suggesting that students generally prefer BL to the traditional teaching model (Ang et al., 2021; Bolandifar, 2017; Wang et al., 2021). These differing results may be attributed to variations in the learning experiences brought about by different BL designs, variations in the levels of LA among students and variations in teacher-student interactions.

Therefore, in addition to dealing with English courses offered at school, EFL students were mostly engaged with extracurricular exams concerning certificates or their future occupations, which took a great deal of time to prepare, reducing the time for schoolwork, especially the online part of BL. At present, many English courses are offered in the form of a BL model, which requires EFL students to work harder than before to get tasks done. Besides learning, students still have many other activities calling for their effort and time. Taking all these into consideration, EFL teachers should reduce the number and variety of tasks online, making students more focused because students are more motivated in a friendly and less stressful learning environment, which is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of BL (Dogra, 2023). In this way, learners would have more freedom to select their learning contents and pace of learning since LA is partially decided by the learning environment, which allows students to decide their learning preferences and pace (Fleischmann, 2021).

The development of LA in the BL environment is contingent upon the effective design and integration of face-to-face and online instructions. From the perspective of stakeholders, it is worth considering how to combine and balance the curriculum and extracurricular activities in the BL environment to improve EFL learning efficiency. Should there be a compromise that implements BL within the class time, including both face-to-face and online instruction, and leaves the spare time to students to prepare for something else? Moreover, it is suggested that it is better not to offer so many blended courses at the same time. There should be trials first, before deciding on which courses are more suitable to be implemented in the BL model. For example, some courses involve a lot of interactions between teachers and students, including instantaneous evaluations, corrections and encouragement which cannot be achieved as effectively online. Therefore, it is suggested that educators should design a flexible schedule that accommodates learners' time constraints because the organisation of online lessons and other BL activities is mainly dependent on instructional design (Wang, 2021).

4.2 Course Content

The second theme revealed participants' dissatisfaction with the course content of the BL at the university. Updated high-quality course content is essential to achieve higher learning outcomes, which is also true for the online learning environment (Zhang & Fang, 2022). However, the content of the online part of the BL at this university was not standardised and lacked integration and complementarity between the face-to-face and online sections of the BL. For example, each English course was constructed with the cooperation of several teachers teaching the same course, with each teacher responsible for some online chapters. Therefore, the activities and tasks online were varied, but they lacked a common theme to unify them, and different teachers would use different standards of assessment. As for the students, they got confused sometimes and gradually lost interest in the online activities of BL. In Mike's reflective journal, he wrote:

Such a blend is not balanced, there is a lack of unified standards for the management of online courses, and it is not a linear progress, which makes me at a loss sometimes as to what to do next and this is not what I truly

want.
(Mike, Reflective journal)

In addition, there is a need for more integration and complementarity of online and face-to-face instruction. The BL model is regarded as the combination of the best features of face-to-face and online instruction, aiming to achieve the maximum teaching effect (Padilla Rodriguez & Armellini, 2021). However, based on the research, the two forms of EFL teaching were most often separate at this university. During the face-to-face section, teachers mostly lectured on the content prepared beforehand but seldom considered what content had already been covered in the online section and ignored the difficult points and interactions with students, which resulted in some “*repetitive work*” (Lucy, Reflective journal) and required “*extra attention*” (Lily, Interview) as described by the students. “*A lot of tasks are too basic, which is not suitable for me, but they are designed to be mandatory and cannot be skipped,*” said Mike (Interview). According to the students, the blended model practiced at the time “*didn’t provide them with enough freedom to decide what to learn and what not to*” (Mike, Interview). Since it was designed for students at different proficiency levels taking the course, it was difficult to meet everyone’s needs.

Instead of separating instruction for face-to-face and online lessons, there should be complementary instruction systems for the two forms of teaching. EFL teachers should think clearly about which part of the teaching content should be designed for online instruction and which part should be done face-to-face. To achieve the desired goal of the BL model, teachers should ensure alignment between online and face-to-face instructional materials and create a cohesive curriculum that seamlessly integrates both modes of learning. Moreover, the time allocated to face-to-face and online instruction should be balanced. It may be better to use some of the online materials in the face-to-face sections, where students would be more focused since teachers need to make the best use of class time by connecting these types of learning with students’ work (Stracke et al., 2023). Before doing this, conducting interviews with EFL students, and sharing student views with EFL teachers may help enhance teacher awareness of the students’ weaknesses and strengths since establishing a good rapport between teachers and students is an essential starting point. In addition, some participants alleged that the contents in the BL online portion were not updated on a timely basis and were constantly out of date.

I can find much more recent and interesting materials on the same topic, why bother to deal with the dated one provided online by the teacher? If it were optional, I would not do it on my own.
(Lucy, Interview)

In response to this problem, more updated knowledge and materials related to the blended courses are needed. At the private university, most of the online content of the BL model was created during the COVID-19 pandemic as a substitute for face-to-face learning at that time. Several years have passed, and some of the teaching materials have become outdated and have not been updated. However, EFL learners have increased access to new knowledge and technologies. To foster their LA and learning interest, EFL teachers should update

their systematic knowledge, renew the contents in the online section of BL, and, most importantly, provide students with the skills to explore new knowledge on their own.

4.3 Support and Interaction

This theme highlights the need for more teacher support and timely feedback in online activities from the EFL teachers, which is essential in developing the LA capacity of EFL learners (Ayesha, 2020). According to Ang et al. (2021), teachers' scaffolding is critical to prepare students to switch from traditional teaching and learning to BL, and to drive "knowledge gains, performance, engagement, collaboration and the overall positive learning experience." (p. 100016) At this private university, most online activities of the BL model were performed by EFL students after class. However, when students were doing those activities by themselves, they often came across difficulties that could not be overcome right away, which would have been possible in the face-to-face classes. The results were that they "either do it randomly or skip the question" (Lucy, Interview). Some of them believed that BL was "becoming an external form of EFL teaching, but not meaningful and practical to the EFL learners' needs" (Mike, Interview). To most of the EFL teachers at the university, the online part of BL was only used as a tool to check attendance, initiate classroom activities, assign homework or take quizzes during the EFL class, but not as a resource to develop students' LA capacity by themselves, which contradicts findings by Aalinezhad et al. (2021) and Alaidarous & Madini (2016) that BL can greatly enhance LA, classroom interaction and cooperation among EFL learners.

In addition, EFL students expressed the desire to interact or communicate freely and actively with their teachers and peers in the online section of the BL model. Alice said in the interview, "I can only do those tasks on my own, even if I did something wrong, nobody helped me with the correction." Students mentioned their experience dealing with online tasks, and comments such as "boring" (Lucy, Reflective journal), "dull," "no help," and "no interaction" (Lily, Reflective journal) frequently occurred. A similar result was reported in Li (2019), where students in the face-to-face section had the advantage of receiving immediate assistance from teachers and peers when encountering difficulties. In contrast, in the online setting of the BL model, students often had to tackle tasks independently and rarely interacted with others. This lack of interaction can negatively impact the cultivation of learning interest among EFL learners and hinder the development of LA.

From the results of the study, it can be inferred that the so-called "more interaction" and "more group cooperation" demonstrated in other studies (Qays et al., 2022; Zhao, 2018) in the BL model among EFL learners was difficult to achieve at this private university. When the researcher probed further into the reasons for their unwillingness to cooperate and interact with others, the participants revealed their fatigue, boredom and frustration in the BL environment, particularly the pressured participation (Skinner et al., 2009). These are the negative emotional engagement factors identified by Skinner et al. (2009) that can inhibit EFL learners' participation in blended EFL teaching activities. According to D'Mello (2013), frustration and boredom are crucial elements

associated with technology-assisted learning.

In the face-to-face EFL class, students can get immediate support and feedback from their English teachers or peers once they encounter difficulties or make mistakes. After this, students can improve themselves quickly and feel that they have accomplished something. During blended online activities, EFL students work alone most of the time and if they encounter difficulties or feel frustrated, they must work out the solution themselves. It may be manageable at the beginning of their online learning, but gradually, they feel isolated and lose interest (Le et al., 2022; Stracke et al., 2023). Alternatively, even if there is some feedback about the overall completion state and common problems of all students, individual guidance is impossible.

LA develops through creating curiosity in learning and strengthening self-confidence and motivation by engaging the learner in meaningful activities (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2021). However, there were many questions in the online part of the BL model, both subjective and objective, with the latter making up the larger proportion. Once students submit the answers, they get the results automatically from the platform, but there are no further explanations for those wrong answers, except for the right or wrong marks, which is not a proper way to develop LA and enhance English proficiency among EFL learners. In addition, LA cannot be achieved in isolation; rather, it is the product of collaborative efforts and can best be realised through interactions with teachers and peers (Little, 2007). To overcome this problem, EFL teachers should give comments and respond to students' work and inquiries within a fixed period, such as regular virtual office hours or discussion sessions, which help address the concerns of students regularly. They can also provide face-to-face interaction with students one-on-one during office hours and increase communication with students.

4.4 Supervision

Due to the characteristics of the BL model, EFL students have more freedom and flexibility in dealing with their online tasks. This should be a distinct feature of BL approach, but it still depends on the autonomous learning capacity of EFL students (Bai et al., 2020). In fact, not every student can manage their learning autonomously and meet the specific requirements set for them. The EFL participants expressed their willingness to work with the teachers to handle their online resources, but not by themselves alone.

I don't like dealing with online tasks alone because I can't always control myself on the internet. I hope the teachers can lead us to do those exercises together because then I can be supervised a bit and focus more on the assignment online. (Bob, Interview)

Even if I was guided by the teachers in the BL model, my mind still went wandering sometimes. I think I can learn better in the face-to-face session under the supervision of the teacher. (Alice, Interview)

Furthermore, a false impression is given by EFL students' online results in the BL model. Due to the limited supervision and not enough LA from EFL teachers and students respectively, the results of online tasks of BL do not truly reflect students'

language proficiency. Many students cheated in the online section, which was shown in the following remarks:

A lot of us hate dealing with so many tasks online, but it's mandatory and has much to do with the result in the final exam. Some students, even if they finish the online exercises of BL, most probably, they copy the answers of others or even pay someone else to get the online tasks done, and always with higher marks always.

(Mike, Interview)

Based on an analysis of their online task outcomes, students demonstrated satisfactory performance. However, there was a big discrepancy in the test results between the online and face-to-face examinations as far as the actual learning outcomes were concerned. As a result, more supervision and attention are required in monitoring the operational process of the BL model and promoting EFL LA. In addition to the process monitoring and evaluation system provided by the LMS, such as the statistics showing test results, online learning hours and task completion rate, EFL teachers should also take other measures such as building rapport with students, showing more care and understanding to the students, designing more interesting tasks to attract students, and ultimately enhancing their intrinsic motivation to learn English autonomously.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the attitudes and perceptions of EFL learners toward the BL and LA in a private university in China. The findings showed that the EFL students had generally negative attitudes toward the BL model and perceived the development of LA in this model as ineffective. Four reasons led to the results. First, the EFL students generally faced time pressures and felt overwhelmed by the blended tasks. Second, the content of the blended courses lacked integration and complementarity between the face-to-face and online sessions. Third, there was a lack of support and timely feedback from the teachers in online BL. Fourth, much more supervision in the BL model was required in terms of student characteristics. As a result, the experience of feeling burdened and isolated contributed to students' overall reluctance to attend the online BL sessions. Besides, the students reported that there was a less positive effect on developing LA by the current BL model; rather, LA was driven by the extracurricular occupation-related examinations.

Therefore, this study is significant in addressing the attitudes and perceptions of private university students. By gaining insight into their attitudes and perceptions toward BL and LA, EFL teachers could become aware of the problems and challenges in the BL process and adjust their teaching content and design to better serve these students. The findings strongly suggest that empirical studies focusing on the pedagogical design and the cultivation of EFL learners' intrinsic motivation for autonomous English learning in the BL environment are essential to address the current situation. However, it is important to acknowledge two limitations in this study. First, the small sample size prevents generalising the results to a broader population. Second, there is a possibility of introducing bias due to the subjective interpretation of data.

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Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

Part 1: Basic Information

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Part 2: Introduction

Thank you for taking part in this interview about the blended learning experience for English majors in private universities. Your insights are crucial for understanding the challenges and opportunities in this learning model. This interview aims to explore your attitudes and perceptions toward the development of learner autonomy in EFL blended learning. Each interview will last for 45-60 minutes, and the researcher will audio the whole process for later analysis if you don't mind. Your name and responses are confidential and will be used for research purposes only. Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Before we proceed, we will ask you to provide your consent to participate in the interview. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to ask before we begin. Once again, thank you for your willingness to share your experiences.

Part 3: Interview Questions

1. For your learning experience in a blended EFL classroom, what do you think are the differences compared to a traditional classroom?
2. Do you prefer online learning or traditional classroom instruction in a blended classroom? Why?
3. Do you think the blended learning model helps to improve your English autonomous learning? Why?
4. How do you usually manage your study time in the blended learning? Is there a fixed plan?
5. Have you encountered difficulties or challenges in learning English in blended learning? How did you cope with it?
6. Do you feel that you have improved your language skills and communication skills during the blended learning process? Please share some examples.
7. For online learning resources in the classroom, which ones do you think have helped you learn the most? Are there any resources that you particularly recommend?
8. What support or improvements do you expect from your school or teachers to better facilitate the development of students' learner autonomy skills in the blended English learning?