Exploring the English Language Education MPhil Scholars' Adaptation to Blended Learning Modality

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Abstract

The blended modality of instruction integrates both traditional and digital online platforms. This study aims to explore the adaptability of English Language Education (ELE) scholars to the blended learning-based MPhil programme under the School of Education at a university in Nepal. The study employed a qualitative approach with an interpretive paradigm, utilizing phenomenology as a research design. Four participants were purposefully selected from the MPhil programme in the ELE second semester of 2024. To uphold the quality and ethical standards of the study, the participants were assigned pseudonyms. A semi-structured interview guideline served as the tool for the study. The interviews were recorded during formally organized Zoom meetings. I recorded and transcribed each interview individually and conducted a thematic analysis. The study results indicate that learners encounter challenges and issues in managing digital tools for e-learning platforms and rely on peer support and inquiries regarding portfolio creation and assessment systems. As the results reveal, blended learning proves beneficial for the diverse, heterogeneous, and dispersed learners at Mofussil, as it enhances their capabilities.

Keywords: Virtual learning, traditional learning, module, digitalization

Introduction

Blended modality of instruction has become the demand and compulsion in Nepal since COVID-19. Likewise, due to the COVID-19 epidemic, we have been compelled to restrict our educational efforts to an exclusively online format (Dahal et al., 2022). The modality continued because it was established as an approach to educating learners. The approach became accessible to learners in diverse settings,

contexts, and geographies. Still, learning continued unabated in the homes of students and faculty members everywhere through synchronous and asynchronous digital learning platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and others (Karakose et al., 2021). The blended modality of instruction is an educational approach that combines traditional face-to-face classroom instruction with online or digital learning activities. This model integrates the strengths of both onsite and online environments to create a more flexible and effective learning experience. My journey to MPhil is also connected with the modality of instruction. I joined Kathmandu University due to the blended modality of instruction because it was feasible for me. It could be difficult for me if it were a face-to-face modality.

Blended modality follows the integration of physical and virtual learning modalities. Learners are dominant in using virtual learning modes. In virtual modes of learning, learners may face multiple adaptability issues. Learners may not be familiar with the devices and their operation. There can be the issue of modules and related applications in modules. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, most educational institutions either adopted the virtual mode of teaching or a blended teaching and learning environment (Ali, 2020). As mentioned earlier, being an MPhil scholar in a blended modality, I, too, have some problems regarding the operation of modules and meetings.

Dimensions of blended learning include digital platforms and integration of ICT tools for learning, which vary from traditional face-to-face classes, where in-person classroom activities and interactions are held. Blended learning can be considered an efficient approach to distance learning in terms of students' learning experience, student-student interaction as well as student-instructor interaction, and is likely to emerge as the predominant education model in the future (Tayebinik & Puteh, 2013). The contents are presented and discussed with the balanced use of digital and physical materials. The discussion goes along with the multimedia presentations and ICT integrations in the classroom. The use of videos, recordings, and documentaries, along with physical materials, enhances constructivism among the learners. Assessment and evaluation are perceived as the process of forming results. Assignments, project work, reflective practices, e-portfolios, peer review and observation, and feedback qualify the learners. In contrast, formal and traditional paper-and-pencil tests are used in traditional evaluation methods. In the blended modality of instruction, dimensions are interconnected, and successful blended learning designs carefully consider them to balance flexibility, engagement, and effectiveness. Blended learning needs rigorous efforts, the right attitude, a handsome budget, and highly motivated teachers and students for its successful implementation (Dangwal, 2017).

This study aimed to explore ELE MPhil scholars' adaptability to blended learning. To accomplish this research objective, I formulated the research questions:

What experiences do students have in blended learning? How do learners successfully adapt to blended learning?

Literature Review

Blended Learning

Blending means combining different elements or mixing various types. Blended learning is a pedagogic approach or phenomenon that combines traditionally practiced face-to-face classroom instruction with the recently adopted modality of online learning activities and resources. It combines both modalities of delivery to create a more diversified and flexible learning experience for students. Online learning first appeared during the 1990s (Schaber et al., 2010). In contrast to traditional learning, online learning refers to those courses that take place completely online no physical classroom present, and teachers and students can participate in the course asynchronously (Nortvig et al., 2018). Likewise, due to the COVID-19 epidemic, we have been compelled to restrict our educational efforts to an exclusively online format (Dahal et al., 2022; Karakose et al., 2022). Schools and universities were closed nationwide due to the lockdown policy of the government of Nepal. After some months, the government of Nepal announced that it would run virtual or online classes for students in schools and universities.

Higher Education and Blended Modality

The government of Nepal established the Nepal Open University (NOU) with the Act of 2073 BS. The major objective was to contribute more to Nepalese higher education with online and distance learning. In the 21st century, phenomenon-based education has become essential and indispensable. The adoption of open and online education has steadily increased, reflecting its significance in the fast-evolving digital age. In Nepal, Nepal Open University (NOU) stands as a pioneer in advancing open and online learning (message from the registrar of NOU, webpage). Similarly, Tribhuvan University has a separate open and distance learning wing. The Open and Distance Education Centre (ODEC, TU), established in 2015 by a decision of the Executive Council of Tribhuvan University, is an independent academic entity under Tribhuvan University. Its primary goal is to make quality higher education accessible to the wider population in Nepal through the open and distance learning approach (webpage of ODCE-TU, Nepal). Similarly, Kathmandu University, School of Education, has offered courses in blended modality. The MPhil programme under KUSOED, ELE is also an example of blended modality. We have embraced the challenges and opportunities

brought about by the pandemic and continue to excel in blended pedagogy through the flipped classroom approach, community-driven teaching methods, and multimodal strategies (Message from Dean, KUSOED, KU).

UGC Guidelines/Framework in the Context of Nepal

For digitalization and techno-friendly learning practices, the University Grant Commission of Nepal has a project on nurturing excellence in higher education programs (NEHEP) 2021/22 – 2025/26. After the disruption of higher education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous universities and colleges in Nepal swiftly adopted online learning beginning in April 2020 (University Grants Commission, 2022). A blended mode of instruction became the essence of Nepal's diverse background. Learners scattered over the nations can access higher education through digitalization and blended modality. The UGC-initiated support to universities/HEIs to respond to COVID-19 contributed to a foundational shift towards expanding higher education through blended and online modes (University Grants Commission, 2022).

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) has developed over time, encompassing various types or approaches that highlight different dimensions of transformation. Its foundational principles, such as critical reflection, transformation, and adaptation concepts, are practiced differently in diverse and innovative ways. Transformation of learning occurs when our existing frames of reference prove inadequate or ineffective in addressing a significant life situation. This process may involve examining the origins of these ineffective perspectives in our personal and social experiences, seeking alternative assumptions that are more effective, and ultimately adopting and acting upon these newly formed and freely chosen assumptions (Mezirow, 1991a, p.167).

As per pedagogical instruction, facilitators have successfully adopted the design to instruct in courses like PGD, MPhil, and PhD at Kathmandu University (Luitel et al., 2024). Still, my concern is about learners' adaptability and experiential reflection in the blended modality of instruction. Learners' observations and experiences also contribute further to enhancing teaching and learning. So, learners' explorations may be useful to minimize the huddles and plan for better learning in the blended modality. The non-English major learners' adaptability to the blended learning mode in College English was low, with a mean (Yangs & Pu, 2022). With the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities offered blended courses of instruction because scattered learners in the country were ready to enroll in such programs. After all, it was feasible and convenient for them. In the new normal education, learners' adaptations utilized

coping mechanisms such as flexibility and initiative, specifically, effective time management and embracing change and adaptation (Laingo & Miralles, 2023). Learning is associated with teachers' preparation, too. Sometimes, students at a higher level may have reservations about teachers' preparation and adaptation to digital technologies, so students may have indifferent observations on classroom instruction, too. It is essential to focus on the capacity building of faculty so they become more familiar with online learning approaches, e-learning tools, and innovative technology to facilitate teaching and learning (Singh et al., 2021).

The resources made me rethink the agenda of experiential reflection of the learners who have completed about one year of blended practice. Learners had ample experience in the blended modality of instruction.

Methods and Procedures

This study was conducted with a qualitative approach. The study followed the interpretivist paradigm and phenomenology as a research design. Central to interpretive phenomenology is understanding and interpreting participants' lived experiences. Interpretive phenomenology has many influences, e.g., Gadamer, Habermas, Ricoeur, and Heidegger (McCance & Mcilfatrick, 2008). For this study, the site was the virtual class of Kathmandu University. The study participants were MPhil Scholars in ELE second semester 2024. The participants were selected through the purposive sampling procedure. Four participants were selected with an intentional selection of samples with certain characteristics or qualities by the research objectives (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). The selection criteria were scholars who had completed the first semester in the blended modality of instruction. I selected two male and two female participants to ensure inclusiveness. The semi-structured interview was the basic tool for data collection. Before the commencement of the interview, all participants signed a consent letter indicating voluntary participation and the confidentiality of the data collected. To maintain the quality and ethical concern of the study, the participants were pseudonymously named Dinesh, Nabin, Sapana, and Gauri in the analysis and interpretation of the results.

The semi-structured interview questions were developed based on the study's objectives and revolved around students' experiences regarding the adaptations of the blended modality of instruction. The interviews were recorded by organizing a Zoom meeting. The researcher individually recorded and transcribed the interview sessions. A qualitative analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) model to develop themes, analysis, and interpretation, i.e., familiarization with the data transcription of verbal data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing a report.

Results and Discussion

Five themes have been generated from the analysis of the data. Firstly, learners have issues with digital literacy, then with the assessment system, support from the tutors, opportunities, and challenges in the students' learning mechanism in the blended modality of instruction to adopt the modality.

Digital Literacy

Digital literacy stands for the effective use of technological devices. The users critically navigate and create information on the utility of technologies. Blending demands shift into the modern digitalization era. It gives a basic understanding and handling of digital devices. Technology plays a vital role in blended modality, Sapana shared as:

> I was not able to join the module for the first time because I was not familiar with computer and e-learning platforms. I asked the teacher to send a link to my mobile and directly joined through the link on the mobile. I was not using Google Meet before. Even I could not change my KUSOD email ID on my mobile, and I was from outside of the Kathmandu University e-learning platform. I could not find the place to submit my assignments because I was unaware of the portal where to submit my assignments. Then I requested one of my friends, and she suggested finding the spot with a pink color in the module and clicking on that then I found the place to submit it. (Interview, 7 Jan. 2025)

Sapana had an issue with utilizing the module; she was using the module for the first time. She was not familiar with computers and Google Meet. She cannot shift to another Gmail account on her device. It was an issue for her to find the assignment portal and submit her work. Incorporating computer technology into higher education in emerging nations like Nepal and India presents an opportunity for transformation still learners have issues navigating digital devices (Gyawali & Mehndroo, 2024).

Dinesh, the next participant, was moderate in handling the digital tools. He can follow the instructions and participate in the activities. He asserted that

> I can follow the instructions given by the instructors and apply accordingly. If I get confused, then I used to watch YouTube videos and settle the issue. I did not face many problems operating the module, but I expected some preliminary literacy in the digital tool before starting the session. (Interview, 5 Jan. 2025).

Directly, it was not a great issue for Dinesh, but he would benefit if he could have preliminary digital literary sessions. Ensuring all students have access to technology and the Internet is essential, creating conditions for equal access to educational resources (Zubtsova et al., 2024).

Gauri did not face great issues regarding utilizing digital devices. She was ICT-friendly. She asserted that

> I did not have any issues handling ICT-related devices; I used them properly. I presented my assignments at once, but sometimes, because of the KU domain issue, I could not get access to the materials at the right time. (Interview, 8 Jan. 2025).

Gauri did not have issues regarding handling the digital devices. She perfectly participated in virtual classroom interactions and discussions.

Next, participant Nabin's experience was different than Sapana's. He was friendly with the digital devices. He shared as

> I handled the module so easily because I was already familiar with e-learning platforms. I directly enrolled in the module on the first day, and I easily reacted and responded to my course facilitators. I posted my reflection on the day on the first day. I was using Google Meet before joining KU during the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate my students. (Interview, 4 Jan. 2025).

Nabin easily utilized the module, and with simple instructions provided by the University, he could enroll in the e-learning platform and participate in the classroom discussion.

As participants shared the information, they faced the module with some challenges. They settled those challenges with dedication and consultation. Technology became a part of learning for them. There was no choice for the learner either to survive in the situation of dropping out of the course. They were dedicated to e-learning platforms and digital devices, so it was adopted within a short period. Despite initial challenges, such as poor internet connectivity and limited familiarity with technology, the majority of respondents adapted quickly to online learning platforms (Diyal & Pandey, 2024).

Supporting Agency

For the adaptation in blended modality, supporting agencies played a cooperative and crucial role. With the guidance of the teachers, peers, and institution, learners became able to utilize the resources in the module. Learners experienced that they did not directly shift into blended modality, they got assistance from multiple inputs. Sapana shared as:

> I received help from peers first, and with my request, one of my peers directed me to the spot in the module where to put my assignments. She helped me to make PowerPoint presentation slides. She helped by describing the procedure of sharing the screen in an online presentation. I also received support from my facilitator. He directed me when I was presenting in an online presentation and

directed me to use the D-space of Kathmandu University library. I also received guidelines from him about how to search for articles in Google Scholar using keywords in related fields. I received help from the University admin staff on how to change my password in the module and use the module for academic discussion. (Interview, 7 Jan. 2025).

Sapana explored that the supporting agencies, like peers, teachers, and admin staff's cooperation made her well-equipped in the blended modality of instruction. Support for novice learners is equally important in the blended mode. In contrast to Sapana, Gauri had a different experience, she said "I did not need supporting agencies. I could easily assimilate in mode. However, some teachers provided delayed feedback on my assessment, so teachers could be more punctual in responding to the students' assignments" (interview, 8 Jan. 2025). So, she claimed that support is not confined to only digitalization rather immediate feedback is a must. Nabin is also in line with Gauri, he explored "I was techno-friendly, so I didn't have issues with supporting agencies. However, some teachers skipped the classes due to their busy schedules" (interview, 4 Jan. 2025). Nabin intended his teacher's schedule to make class disturbed and unsupported.

Dinesh explored as "I took help from my peers, and sometimes, I telephoned the KU administration and solved the issue on the module's passcode. I reset my password with the help of the administration." (Interview, 5 Jan. 2025).

He shared that adaptation may have very simple issues, which can be easily solved with a single telephone call. Novice practitioners in blended mode were assisted by multiple agencies. They had solved the issues with multiple consultations. Students' needs include engaging learning experiences, the flexibility of access, and support for effectively utilizing learning technologies (Roberts et al., 2024).

Assessment System

The assessment system in blended modality was based on the organizational framework. The assessment system differs from one institution to another. This particular assessment system, followed by the institute, was observed differently by the participants. Gauri asserted as

I was disappointed when the first-semester result was published. It was beyond my expectations; I wish it could be the written test examination. She explored that some teachers were biased, and the students who copied and produced articles with AI-generated were awarded higher grades. The real evaluation was lacking in the first semester. Let's wait for the second semester. The assessment modality needs to be reviewed. The existing model is not grading students fairly. (Interview, 8 Jan. 2025).

Gauri's statement was in disagreement with the current practice of the assessment system. She disagreed with some of the teachers who graded the students biasedly. She argued that the assessment system should be reviewed and justice must be.

Another participant, Nabin, also had a similar experience as Gauri. According to Nabin

> I am not satisfied with the grading system of KU. Simply, writing papers and evaluating the papers did not do justice to the learners. Learners will have multiple potentialities to be assessed, so the current assessment system is to be reviewed. I know some of our friends got good grades because they were close to the teachers. I agree some professors graded fairly and some did unfairly. (Interview, 4 Jan. 2025).

Nabin was not satisfied with the current grading and assessment system. He explored that the adopted system of assessment may offer a biased evaluation system. Dinesh had painful experiences like Nabin. He added, "I am not satisfied with KU's current evaluation system" (interview, 5 Jan. 2025). The participant badly criticized the assessment system in blended modality. They felt biased in assessment and grading by some of the facilitators. The inappropriate assessment system, higher education quality has been deteriorating day by day compared to developed countries, and it is mainly due to lack of accountability (examiner, examinee, and exam authority), time allocation, lack of digital technology to assess student progress, lack of item analysis, and lack of the alternative use of the paper-pencil test (Acharya, 2022).

Opportunities and Challenges

In the blended modality of instruction, learners get access to higher education while staying at their workplace. It is obvious that if there were no provision of blended modality at KU, then this may not be the population for MPhil studies. However, some challenges are encountered related to technical issues and their operation. Participants argued that they had faced problems regarding handling Google Meet, and they had not previously directly used the app for learning. In this regard, Dinesh argued,

> My MPhil journey would not have come true if there was no blended modality because am a permanent teacher in a remote area of Nepal. I can manage to leave for my physical classes because it goes only for 7 days each semester. I am balancing it as per my request to the head teacher and school management. However, I have issues like internet connection, frequent power cuts, and sometimes less interaction with teachers in person. I felt learning emotions and liveliness are lost in the blended modality of interactions. (Interview, 5 Jan. 2025).

Dinesh explored a blended modality, which made his dream come true for higher studies, but it is like something is better than nothing. The spirit of learning is destroyed in virtual classes. Gauri shared that

> I am partially happy with the approach. I have no choice because I am a

permanent teacher in a remote area of Nepal. No doubt, the virtual learning platform assisted me a lot. However, I found virtual classes can be used to cheat the teacher because we may log in to the module, do attendance, and disappear. If we are not well prepared, then we may pretend as we have. Network issue or power cuts issue. (Interview, 8 Jan. 2025).

She asserted that she got an opportunity to higher studies, but there were plenty of chances to escape from the discussion and interactions in virtual classes. Similarly, Sapana shared that

I feel blended learning as blessing to me which enabled me to higher education. I request authorities to organize physical classes at the beginning which can be fruitful to handle digital tools and devices. (Interview, 7 Jan. 2025)

Sapana declared that preliminary digital issues must be settled then the approach becomes a blessing to the scattered learners around. Nabin asserted that

I found this approach is conducive to the day workers like me. Higher education at home, and even in the evening time was fortunate to me. I feel distracted when my friends do not participate in breakout room assignments. I feel as if they are logged in to the module and busy somewhere. Sometimes friends unmute and let the class go on and surrounding noises make the whole class disturbed. (interview, 4 Jan. 2025)

Nabin's sharing was so clear: though the approach is a golden opportunity, friends are not utilizing it with protocols and are made disoriented in the classroom.

The blended learning approach became a blessing to the learners who are scattered around different regions and workplaces. For learners who were busy during the day and could manage the time in the evening, it became a piece of cake. The approach contributes a lot to higher studies and teacher professional development. However, it has issues like emotional learning and digital ethics in using ICT tools. If participants misuse applications like Google Docs, recordings, and unmuting, it causes trouble for other participants in the group, too. Blended learning must be supplemented by integrating technology for diverse instructional purposes and utilizing it (Istenič, 2024). Digitalization in pedagogy addresses the issue of diverse learners; they are engaged in multiple virtual learning modules and practicing recent trends and practices in academia. Digital development and diversification in methodology, where higher education is also shifting as a compelled switch over in methodological approaches, needs an assessment for the decision criteria with a proper process and justification (Nermend et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The findings of this study have significant implications for the practices of the blended approach in higher education. The exploration and experiences of learners provide valuable insights into adaptability and challenges in virtual and blended learning. First, the study highlights the essence of digital literacy in a paradigm shift in the blended approach. The mixed ability to handle digital tools and the participants' reflection made the learning approach partially questionable. Second, the study reveals the necessity of addressing supporting agencies to familiarize the module and its application inside. Third, the assessment system was questioned by the participants; they were often unsatisfied with the first-semester results. They argue that it needs to be reviewed with standard rubrics, which could satisfy all. Finally, the study emphasizes the essence of a blended approach with some technological challenges. The perfect infrastructure assists more with a blended approach to teaching and learning. It is crucial for course-offering institutions, policymakers, teacher educators, and learners to actively utilize the e-learning platforms and blended learning phenomena. The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the paradigm shift in pedagogical approaches in this technological world. Such a small-scale qualitative study may not be applicable and generalized to the rest of the settings. It may only work as a reference for further study.

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