



The Blended Learning as an Alternative to the Online Education for the Bangladeshi Universities

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ABSTRACT

During the Covid-19, online education, the only alternative to the face-to-face education had a number of limitations and challenges such as, the negative conception about the lack of quality, non-achievement of learning outcomes, chances of unfair means in examinations, digital divide and the lack of trained teachers. So, it was assumed that blended education can be an effective alternative to the online education. But there was no research as to authenticate the efficacy of this method. This study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of students and teachers about blended learning. This is a qualitative, in particular, case study. The data came from interviews with 15 student participants and two teachers who conducted a blended course, their discussions, and postings on online forums, such as Facebook, Google Classroom, and student journals. Data collected from these sources were analyzed following the qualitative data analysis method. The majority of the participants in this study opine that the blended method is a useful substitute for traditional classroom instruction for the universities of Bangladesh. This method, they reported, offered them opportunities such as more flexibility, increased learning through teacher and peer feedback, scope for self-exploration, better and enhanced interaction, an increase of technological skills, and higher-order thinking though there are a number of challenges of blended method such as the digital divide, and the lack of teacher training. This study can be an eye-opener for stakeholders like UGC Bangladesh, university authorities to improve the quality of higher education.

Keywords:

Blended learning, Online education, Flexibility, Interaction, Student satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Despite the popularity of e-learning in promoting distance education in Bangladesh, there are some problems with its implementation at the tertiary level in Bangladesh (Kamal & Sultana, 2002; Mahmud, 2010). They are the following: Inadequate faculty members who are experts in e-learning. A tendency toward the 'Conventionalization of the Distance Learning System' is also noticed sometimes. Access to ICT and devices is very scanty in Bangladesh because of economic hardships. Delay in the design and creation of e-learning materials and their proper disbursement to the students is another important issue. Financial problems of parents; lack of infrastructure, such as power and internet in many places of the country, and the lack of funds and other logistics at universities to develop their computer laboratories are other significant factors. Good research and assessment activities are very poor in terms of quality e-learning for distance education at Bangladesh Open University (BOU) in particular. The perception of many people about the quality of distance education provided by BOU is also not positive. The lack of Government sponsorship for BOU in comparison with other public universities is mentioned as a major reason for its slow progress too (Al-Masum & Chowdhury, 2013).

Despite the lack of institutional attention and patronization from the government, the necessity of online education has been recognized recently more than ever before during the Covid-19 pandemic. Keeping this Covid-19 pandemic situation apart, Bangladesh should go for online education for a number of practical reasons. The need for online education is much more in Bangladesh considering the following realities: high rent of urban households for rural students, intolerable traffic jams in the big cities, and social conservatism regarding women's education (Sohail, 2018). But there is a negative perception among people of all classes of society including the policy-makers regarding online education at all levels. The negative perception centers around issues like the quality of these degrees, and the lack of students' engagement with the teachers. The other challenges might be the limited scope of the curriculum, the unreliable system of testing, recognition of certificates, costs, and the lack of other logistic support (Sohail, 2018).

As said earlier, the perception of common people regarding online education is not positive. Online education has not been heartily accepted and welcome by policy-makers in the government as well. Up until recently, no other universities—public or private—had received permission from the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) to offer any online or hybrid courses in Bangladesh. It continues to be unwilling to permit any institution other than BOU to offer a portion of its degree programs online (Sohail, 2018). Therefore, the public's negative impression of online education is certain to spread when neither the Ministry of Education of Bangladesh nor the UGC, the body that oversees higher education, endorse it. Bangladeshis have a poor opinion of online learning for a variety of reasons, including the inability to communicate directly with instructors, poor educational quality, failure to meet learning objectives, exam cheating, and so forth. There is also a perception among

people that online education does not ensure student satisfaction because in this mode students cannot acquire knowledge in the presence and with the guidance of their teachers. The lack of synchronous interaction in online learning affects learning and teaching, and hence, the quality of skills of the students (Arviso, 2019). Due to this negative perception, the majority of teachers of public universities in Bangladesh did not conduct online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic though they were provided with internet at a subsidized price ("Chottogram bishwbiddalaye mathro chobbish jon baro jibi internet babohar koreche", 2021, Jan 18).

In addition to the unwillingness of teachers and students to do online classes during the Covid-19, the negative perception of the policymakers and higher authorities in universities, about online education is a strong impediment to introducing online education. In this context, as the blended learning mode keeps scope for a considerable portion of face-to-face teaching and learning, it can remove the long-held prejudice regarding distance and online education to a great extent. As a solution to that misconception, an alternative mode of education, i.e., the blended method, if implemented with efficiency and quality, can become a similarly effective method like the face-to-face method. So, against the backdrop of these problems with the online education, blended learning is assumed to become an effective mode of higher education and thus open opportunities for higher education and skill development for young people because there is the scope for face-to-face classes in this mode. This scope for face-to-face education in the blended method is assumed to offer more learning opportunities and learning outcomes for the students than the full online. This research aims to investigate whether blended method can become an alternative but effective mode of higher education for Bangladesh in place of the online education. The research questions framed out of this assumption are as follow.

1. How can blended learning be an alternative but effective mode of higher education for the Bangladeshi universities?
2. What are the impacts of blended learning in promoting higher education in Bangladesh?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a number of research that have explored the various aspects of this approach. The positive impacts as found in this research are: increase in students' proficiency; motivation; success; collaboration and team work skills; learner-centeredness (Al-Sarrani, 2010; Alebaikan & Troudi; 2010; Kwak et al., 2015). Many researchers also put a high value on the effectiveness of blended learning in increasing student motivation (Kwak, et al., 2015). It appears that blended learning is in high demand in many educational training programs today compared to traditional teaching. On the other hand, many institutions face various problems and challenges in implementing blended learning methods. The challenges are: lack of enthusiasm, instructors' lack of IT knowledge and expertise, and inadequate logistical support,

including internet connection; the danger of plagiarism and so on (Porter et al., 2016; Tshabalala et al., 2014; Moskal et al., 2013; Wong, et al., 2014).

The research in this area is discussed below along thematic lines. The themes are: a) learning outcomes b) achievement of higher-order learning c) student satisfaction d) student motivation e) learning flexibility f) cost and time g) student – teacher’s interaction h) student-student interaction. After that, the obstacles to the implementation of online learning in Bangladesh are discussed. After that the research gap in the area of blended learning in Bangladesh is also discussed. First, the themes of effectiveness are discussed.

a. Learning Outcomes

In a century where technological innovations are at the center of everything, utilizing technology to enhance a course can contribute to the creation of an efficient teaching and learning environment. According to Vaughan et al. (2017), blended learning improves student engagement and learning, which leads to improved performance. According to Nasser's (2020) qualitative study conducted in US community colleges, students' accessibility, motivation, visualization, social skills, and critical thinking abilities all improved as a result of the blended learning environment.

Abbas (2018) experimenting with a blended English writing course for Academic Purposes in Iraq in which the majority of the students reported improvement in their problem-solving, written communication and critical thinking skills throughout the course. Sheet's study (2018) indicate that the use of the blended teaching method can create a favorable condition to develop students' writing skill. Sahni (2019) in Saudi Arabia found better student learning in the group where blended learning was followed.

b. Higher Order Thinking Skills

The exposure to blended learning provides students with the opportunity to gain the 21st-century skill sets that they need to compete in the global marketplace (Tucker, 2012). Tucker (2012) identified several benefits of a blended learning model: saving time, saving money, increasing one-on-one interaction among students, more effective communication, and building community and relationships with students. Mastering these skills and learning to communicate in a variety of mediums prepare students for the workplace. Margolis, Porter, and Pitterle's (2017) qualitative study in a blended pharmacy course indicate flexible timing, teacher support, and classroom exercises that could be applied to problems in the actual world of the twenty-first century.

c. Student Satisfaction

Though Deschacht et al. (2015) mentioned that lower achievement in blended learning may accrue from a lack of interest and ease in using technology in blended learning courses, greater student satisfaction was found by Herloa (2015) and Lim et al. (2014) in a blended learning environment when teachers actively engaged and supported learners at every step and with every component of the program. Herloa (2015) discovered that a blended master's program improved student learning such as resulting in increased intrinsic drive, curiosity, and self-efficacy of students (Herloa, 2015).

Feleae et al.'s (2017)' research found enhanced student learning experiences and learning outcomes. Osgerby's (2013) qualitative study stated that students doing the course through Moodle and face-to-face mode reported more satisfaction in the blended learning approach. According to Dumont and Raggo (2018), teachers have seen better levels of student satisfaction and enrollment in a mixed course. Students develop a sense of community in a blended course and it significantly increases learning outcomes and ensure quality of education (Ebadi & Ghuchi, 2017).

d. Student Motivation

Numerous studies (e.g., Al-Sarrani, 2010; Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Kwak et al, 2015; Shand et al. (2016) mentioned the impacts of blended learning to enhance students' motivation in the classroom and the level of learning in higher secondary levels. Bray (2016) argued, "Personalized learning helps learners become intrinsically motivated to learn, so they own and drive their learning" (p. 1). Tarvyd's (2019) studies conducted in two high schools in US came out with six positive outcomes of blended learning course such as flexible schedule, alternate teaching methods, encouraging, varied learning styles, improved learning supports, and multiple reasons to sign up for a blended learning program.

e. Learning Flexibility

Increased flexibility is frequently mentioned by researchers as one of the blended learning platform's noteworthy benefits. (Fogal et al.; Osgerby, 2013). Blended learning facilitates the way for flexible learning through participation at different times and at different places, at least for certain portions of the course (Stone & Perumean-Chaney, 2011).

According to Enrichsen et al. (2017), students are happier with their courses when they perceive flexibility, the instructor's involvement, engaging communication, and a variety of tasks. In mixed learning environments, the emphasis is on personalized learning styles, and Laer and Elen (2017) discuss how these characteristics affect students' happiness with their educational experiences. All these interactions and experiences create a positive attitude to learning. Barker (2015) says, "The major

advantage of hybrid classes is that this forum allows some flexibility to students with multiple responsibilities to maximize their time" (p. 144). Blended learning can also be a way to cut students' educational costs. According to Barker (2015), "hybrid courses provide an alternative to spending time on campus; it reduces commuting time and travel expenses." (p. 145).

f. Cost and Time

Research indicates that the blended method has a role in reducing education costs and time spent on continuing education (Poon, 2013; Marcucci et al., 2008). According to Poon (2013), blended learning in higher education has reduced student dropout rate and other potential costs and ensured resource savings (Poon, 2013). Marcucci, et al. (2008) say that institutions of higher education worldwide are facing increase in costs of education on the one hand and diminishing financial support from the government on the other.

The Stanford research strongly suggests that using the blended method could have a profound effect on overall completion rates by helping institutions to radically raise the return from their current investments in self-paced content (Singh & Reed, 2001). Research by the University of Tennessee's Physician's Executive MBA (PEMBA) program for mid-career doctors has shown that blended learning programs can be completed in approximately one-half the time, at less than half the cost. This program also demonstrated an overall 10% better learning outcome than the traditional classroom learning method because of different forms of physical and virtual live e-learning, coupled with the ability of the students to test their learning in the workplace immediately (Singh, 2003).

g. Student-teacher Interaction

Garrison (2017) thought that as teachers' responsiveness to students' needs tends to diminish location and space, faculty engagement appears to have the greatest impact on students' satisfaction (Garrison, 2017). Vaughan and Cloutier's (2016) study recommended for increasing the interaction emphasized on expanding the online activities through virtual office hours and social media for cooperative and community-centered assignments (Vaughan & Cloutier, 2016).

h. Student-student Interaction

According to research, blended learning environments can boost student-to-student interactions, empowering learners to become far more active participants in their own education (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003; Tabor, 2007). The relationships between teachers, students, and peers affect how satisfied students are with their courses. (Owston et al., 2013). Bouilheres et al.'s (2020)'study proved students' claims that the perception of their learning achievement as a result of interactions in blended learning

environment in each of their classes at the university was beneficially impacted. Previous studies (Cole, et al., 2014; Kuo et al., 2014) have mentioned student dissatisfaction especially, the lack of interaction between the instructor and the learners in online education.

2.2. Obstacles to the Implementations of the Blended Learning in Bangladesh

The biggest barriers to establishing blended learning in Bangladesh are a lack of logistical assistance and the resistance to changing prevalent ideas. (Khan et al., 2012,). In Bangladesh, blended learning is a relatively new concept. Despite the efficiency and benefits of blended learning in the delivery of education, the majority of Bangladesh's higher education institutions may not be enthusiastic about it. Teachers have a lot of difficulties utilizing these EdTech start-ups, including how to begin using it, when to use it, how to minimize distractions for students, and how to utilize students' skills via EdTech. It may be partially explained by their reluctance to use online learning environments and their ignorance of cutting-edge new pedagogies. (Dhawan, 2020).

Shrestha et al. (2022) found that the majority of teachers did not like to use online resources during the pre-pandemic time of teaching. Around 8% of teachers never used online resources during that time and around 15% of teachers reported they might not use online resources even during post-pandemic teaching. According to Mahmuda (2016), the lack of training in applying new technology is a formidable barrier to the digitalization of education at universities in Bangladesh though most of the students in Bangladesh are adept at using various online tools for learning. Moreover, implementing blended learning in higher educational institutions is difficult due to a lack of necessary tools and technologies, a lack of drive for self-regulated learning, a lack of interaction between facilitators and students, and a lack of appropriate assessment strategies (Al-Amin et al., 2021). Another important issue might be the flexibility of blended method because students might not feel motivated to attend the online classes or do the online activities which are binding in the face-to-face classes. A review of studies on e-learning and blended learning in Bangladesh will help to further understand the situation of blended learning in Bangladeshi universities.

2.3. Research Gaps

While e-learning, distance learning, and the use of technology in education have been extensively studied in Bangladesh (Mustary, 2019; Joher, 2018), studies on blended learning in Bangladeshi higher education, as well as its efficacy and application in the aforementioned field, are scarce. Any research that is done mostly concentrates on problems, challenges, and mixed learning mode solutions. There was no research done on the experiences of instructors and students utilizing the blended learning model. Furthermore, the opinions of the same set of samples are compared in my research about the three modes of educational delivery: hybrid, online, and in-person. We will

conduct a comparative analysis of these three educational modalities with respect to themes like adaptability, interactivity, educational quality, teacher feedback, and learning diversity. We will also look at some of the barriers to blended learning implementation, such as the lack of support from the public, Bangladesh's infrastructural issues, and the country's digital divide. Our research will not only investigate the experiences of university students with blended learning, but also suggest the prospects of blended learning in Bangladeshi higher education.

METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative methodology, particularly through the use of case studies. Since our goal is to comprehend adult learners' experiences with a blended learning course, this is more in line with an exploratory case study. The researchers gathered information for this study via interviews and other sources of documentation. After observing an example blended English writing course, an English writing course was converted into a mixed learning environment. This blended course was offered in parallel with a regular online English writing course at the Department of English of a university in Chattogram, Bangladesh. In total 98 students had to do the course in the semester in two sections. Two teachers taught this course online. Out of the 98 students, 38 students did the course in the blended format. The primary reason the course ran for twelve weeks was because the desired material could be covered in that amount of time. Every Sunday, at the beginning of the week, there was a one and a half-hour in-person lesson. This means that over the whole semester, face-to-face instruction was scheduled for 18 hours out of 42 total class hours, and 24 hours were spent online via Zoom. Two teachers taught the face-to-face classes of blended course alternately every week for one and a half hours in the campus. One teacher taught the course online via zoom.

Participants

The researchers followed the purposive sampling technique for interview because the samples used to fulfill some criteria. For the pre-course interviews, 15 participants out of 38 were selected. It was ensured that they would attend regularly both the face-to-face and online classes of the course. The 15 participants for the interview were labelled as Participant-A to Participant -O.

Data Collection Tools

For this case study, the researchers used two instruments. Primary data sources include interview protocol collected from the Blended Learning Toolkit (2011) with some customization. In April 2011, the University of Central Florida (UCF) developed

the Blended Learning Toolkit, a comprehensive resource for individuals and institutions to draw upon to develop and deploy blended learning initiatives. The pre-course interview had open ended questions on the advantages and the disadvantages of online education and the post-course interview had open-ended questions about issues such as, benefits/ harms blended learning can yield to the higher education of Bangladesh, and the comparative study of the online and blended education. The teachers' interview protocol contained open-ended questions including the contribution of blended learning to the higher education of Bangladesh, the usefulness of blended learning in comparison with the online education for the Bangladeshi university students.

3.2. Document Analysis

Documents (Posts in Discussion Board of Google Classroom, Face book, Student diaries)

We also relied on some other sources for data, i.e., artifacts or documents related to the blended course for data. They are- documents such as, (i) Journal writing, (ii) posts of the participants in the Discussion Forum of the Google Classroom created for the course, and (iii) their posts in the Facebook group that was created for communication among students and teachers.

The FB posts of teachers and students were analyzed for thematic purposes. In addition to that, students were asked to reflect on their learning experiences every week in personal journals because they might help to keep record of the feelings in an organized way. Though a lot of posts from the Google Classroom and Facebook Group could be used as data, we could not have adequate data from the student diaries. Students were reluctant to write the dairies in their spare time. Only three students wrote in their diaries and 4 quotes from these journals could be used as data in this study.

3.3. Data Analysis

In this study, similar statements were grouped and classified after each question's answers were reviewed. The Facebook and Google Classroom posts were made using a similar process. The researchers coded the data. As advised by Saldana (2015), we employed the axial coding method and open coding during the coding procedure. Twelve codes were initially generated from the Facebook postings, Google Classroom, and interview data.

Ethical Issues of the Research

All study participants had the right to privacy, as well as the assurance that there would be no potential conflicts of interest in the study's conduct and that there would be no

obvious risks to their physical health, psychological health, financial condition, or professional lift from taking part in the study (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). Even if they were in the middle of the interview, the participants were free to leave the study if they felt it was too sensitive or personal. We ensured them that their identities would remain confidential and got the participants read the consent forms before signing them.

Trustworthiness

Peer review and debriefing is the first method to boost the discovery's credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The goal is to get a second opinion from a colleague who is knowledgeable about the subject of the study and who can "question the investigator's assumptions" (Shenton, 2004, p. 67). The study's credibility can be increased by using the debriefing sessions' feedback to support it (Shenton, 2004). The researchers talked about the steps involved in the data analysis process with my two co-workers who took part as course instructors and responders. Another way to ensure credibility is the prolonged engagement with the research. Data from students and teachers were cross-referenced. Direct quotations were also given. We also described the methodological process, data collection and analysis procedure in detail.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A comparison between the results of the pre-course and post-course interviews will help us to find the differences between the student experiences of online and face-to-face education on one hand and blended learning on the other. This comparison will help to compare our findings vis-à-vis online, face-to-face and blended method with previous research in this area. The following subthemes are compared to investigate the differences and then they are discussed from the perspectives of previous research. They are- interaction and peer feedback, teacher feedback, learning varieties, student satisfaction and motivation, quality of education and assessments, and the use of technology. At the same time, the findings are discussed with reference to previous research in blended learning method.

4.1.1. Interaction and Peer Feedback

All replies about online education revealed the common sub-theme of interaction. All students who have taken online courses have expressed frustration with the lack of engagement of any kind. According to the results of the pre-course interview, the challenges with online classrooms are the lack of teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, group work, and fun. The students said that online classes did not develop their communicative skills because there was no interaction in the class. From Facebook post, the following response echoed the same theme where the participants emphasized the lack of interaction in the online classroom. For instance, *"Our ability to communicate is not developed in an online course as there is no student-teacher*

connection." (Facebook Post, 09 June 2021). The lack of peer support in online classes was found in the responses of all participants during the pre-course interview. After doing the blended course, their attitudes have changed. Twelve students reported that interaction in the face-to-face classes of the blended method was better than online classes and the interaction removed their boredom and it was full of fun.

Limited instantaneous engagement is undoubtedly a problem in online learning. The literature on online education also shares this point of view. Online learning's absence of synchronous engagement has a negative effect on both learning and teaching, and consequently, on students' ability to learn new abilities. It is thought that students who participate in face-to-face programs perform better than those who take online courses because they have more opportunities for physical connection with their lecturers and other students (Arviso, 2019). Student D concurs with this viewpoint. *"I will take part in a blended course at the university because I will be able to use technology in online education and improve my communication skills in face-to-face instruction,"* he stated. (Participant-D, Interview, 24 June 2021). Therefore, blended learning is helpful since it gives students access to both in-person and online learning opportunities. The two teachers in our findings also highlighted the opportunity of interaction in the blended method. Teacher-1 and teacher-2 have acknowledged the scope for better interaction in the blended than in the face-to-face classes because they said that in the blended method, the online portion offered more scope for interaction between teachers and students. Twelve students claimed that the blended course increased their interactivity and communication. Sorbie's (2015) study shows that blended learning takes into account students' learning preferences, encourages collaboration among learners, and involves in conversation, hands-on learning, and student-student contact with teachers. Dumont and Raggo (2018) confirmed Kintu et al.'s (2017) assertion that blended learning fosters a strong sense of cooperation among students by finding greater favorable academic achievement as a result of the interaction in this method.

The two teachers also highlighted the interaction opportunity in the blended method. Teacher-1 and teacher-2 acknowledged better interaction in the blended than in the face-to-face classes because they said that in the blended method, the online portion offers more scope for interaction between teachers and students. Teacher-1 opined that teachers remain connected with students through different platforms. He found the blended method better than full online in terms of interaction. So, from the above discussion, it comes out that in terms of peer feedback and interaction, face-to-face education is better than online, and the blended method is better than face-to-face in many respects as is evident from the positive responses of 11 students during post-course interviews.

4.1.2. Teacher Feedback

The absence of teacher input was cited by respondents as a major issue with online education during pre-course discussions. Seven students stated that online education

does not offer fast feedback. In online education, teachers can only give a limited amount of feedback, and the help they can offer is not uniform or sufficient for everyone. On the other hand, there was reported better teacher feedback in the blended course. The combined feedback got from both the face-to-face and online portions of the blended course was more effective than the solely face-to-face or online. Ten students were happy with the teacher feedback they got during both the face-to-face and online classes. Student M said, *"After submitting for the first time, teachers would give us feedback about our essays. Moreover, teachers would rewrite our errors and motivate us how to write an essay in the best way."* (Participant-M, Interview, 11 June 2021). Student L said, *"Teachers would individually tell us where our mistakes were during not only the face-to-face but also the online classes. They also gave us feedback in the blog."* (Participant-L, Interview, 18 June 2021).

In this study, eleven students reported that their blended course provided them with more teacher help and feedback. In this study, more student-teacher interaction was cited as a benefit of blended learning. As demonstrated in prior studies, blended education offered more opportunities for student-teacher and student-student engagement than online education. They all expressed a desire to enroll in more blended courses at the university. 11 of the 15 respondents believed that the teacher feedback they got in the face-to-face classes of the blended course was the main achievement from the course. The chance to interact with their instructors in person during the in-person classes helped them to work out any issues they encountered during the course's online component. Interactions between students and content, students and instructors, and students themselves are three sorts of interactions that can occur in blended learning environments, according to Kurucay and Inan (2017). As the blended course is asynchronous, teachers can provide comments at any time. According to Garrison's (2017) research, faculty contact has the greatest influence on students' satisfaction with teachers' responsive behaviors (Garrison, 2017).

Vaughan and Cloutier's (2016) study to assess the effectiveness of a blended four-year education program emphasized expanding the online activities of teachers through virtual office hours and social media for cooperative assignments (Vaughan & Cloutier, 2016). The combined feedback of teachers and peers worked as a strong factor in increasing students' motivation for the blended course in my study. In spite of a few exceptions, the majority of students had a positive opinion about the efficacy of teacher feedback. Student F said, *"After the teacher's feedback, I could correct all my mistakes. This is what I liked most of the blended method."* (Participant-F, Interview, 20 June 2021). So, from the above discussion it is evident that in terms of teacher feedback, a blended course is better because here students get feedback not only during the face-to-face classes but also during the online classes.

4.1.3. Learning Varieties and Motivation

The pre-course interview results show that nine of the respondents mentioned the varieties in the learning activities of the face-to-face classes that motivated them for

learning. They found the effectiveness of different ways of learning including reading, writing, and presentations, sharing of views, projects, and group work. On the other hand, six students mentioned the poor learning achievement of students in the face-to-face classes because students tended to depend more increasingly on teachers, and that guided to less inclination to self-exploration and self-learning by students. But the post-course interviews indicate that the majority of students have found the online portions of blended course very satisfying because there were multifarious ways of learning in the online classes of the method. They said that in the blended method they could find different types of learning activities in the face-to-face classes. Again, during the online classes, they could use varieties of online platforms and resources. That is why; the learning varieties in the blended course were much more than in either face-to-face or online classes. The results indicate more learning varieties in the blended method compared to either face-to-face or online method.

The blended course, according to 14 students, provided them with a wider range of learning opportunities than both online and in-person instruction. Student M said, *"In a blended course, much more can be done online in addition to the main materials. We can get acquainted with different devices. Ideas are available on various education sites. Various topics can be discussed with others in the class."* (Participant-M, Interview, 11 June 2021). Although the majority of survey participants valued face-to-face education for the diversity of learning activities it offered, many of them also cited the multifaceted activities of online education as one of its attractions. This opinion is also stated by Martin et al. (2020) who say that detailed recording of student performance such as participation in courses, projects, quizzes and exams in the system through Learning Management System (LMS) is very advantageous in terms of evaluation of the education (Martin et al., 2020). Students can enjoy the benefits of employing a variety of learning systems in the blended learning's online activities. Neither face-to-face learning nor online learning alone offers the chance for deeper learning. The participants gain additional learning benefits from the combination of in-person and online activities. According to Sorbie (2015), blended learning accommodates students' learning preferences, encourages student participation, and involves both students and instructors in interactive discussions and hands-on learning exercises (Sorbie, 2015).

The better learning is the reason why the participants in this study liked the blended education. In this study, practically all participants agreed that the blended course's use of technology had improved their proficiency with technology and problem-solving tasks. The majority of respondents stated that since everything is centered around technological improvements, conducting a course through technology may help to produce an efficient teaching and learning environment. This view is comparable to Vaughan, et al. (2017) and (Wornyo et al., 2018). Nine respondents (A.C.E.H.I.) expressed the opinion that the variety of learning experiences in in-person sessions inspires them to learn. C wrote, *"I truly enjoyed the engaging talks given by my teachers, having regular lessons, hanging out with friends, and more. Because students have access to a variety of*

learning activities on campus, in-person classes are preferable than virtual ones. I found that in a familiar, typical classroom setting prior to the corona pandemic, I was more at ease and studied more quickly. It is a very efficient method of learning since it frequently incorporates many learning styles, such as reading, writing, discussion, presenting, projects, and group work, among others." (Participant-C, Facebook post, 09 March 2021).

According to Vaughan et al. (2017), blended learning improves student engagement and learning, which results in better performance. Since the learning objectives are met through improved learning abilities with a greater emphasis on reflecting experiences as modern technologies start to play a part in education through blended learning, the learning experience is better and more realistic for learners (Wornyo et al., 2018). The ease in using technology comes from the technological skills of the learners, which in turn, leads to the exploration of and enjoyment of learning varieties. The technological skills and the ease with which learners can use technology can create satisfaction among exploratory learners in modern times.

4.1.4. Student Satisfaction and Motivation

The reasons for student satisfaction with the blended course titled "English Writing Skill", accrued from factors like teachers' feedback, peer feedback, and learning in a new and innovative way. 10 students agreed that teachers' feedback made them the happiest. 11 students said that they were satisfied with the course because it offered them the opportunity to do a course by using different platforms and resources. Student C said, *"This course gave a new experience to me."* Student D stated, *"I am quite satisfied because I have learned the proper way of writing essays on different topics."* (Participant-D, Interview 24 June 2021). One student wrote in the Diary, *"When asked to give feedback after writing the essay, a lot of fear was there at work. But after the teacher's motivation, I got the courage and dared to write. It has removed my fear of making mistakes. I started to write for public reading."* (Participant-F, Diary 23 June 2021). Student-J said, *"I could not understand every subject well in the online classes. In the face-to-face classes, I could understand them better."* (Participant-J Interview, 29 June 2021). So, here it is seen that a strong correlation exists between satisfaction and learning varieties and techniques of learning.

These views are reflected in other previous studies. Asian students have a high success rate and are satisfied with blended learning, as shown by Chin (2015). Feleae, et al.,'s (2017) research found positive attitudes of Romanian students toward blended learning. According to Dumont and Raggo (2018), teachers have seen better levels of student satisfaction and enrollment in a blended course. Students' strong sense of teamwork is strengthened through blended learning (Kintu et al., 2017). When students are exposed to the blended learning instructional methods, there will be effective learning experiences for learners to significantly increase learning outcomes (Ebadi & Ghuchi, 2018).

4.1.5. Quality of Education and Assessment

The pre-course interview findings indicate the lack of quality of online education in terms of real learning, cheating in online education, slow development of communication skills of the students, and the lack of attention in an online class. Some students, on the other hand, criticized face-to-face education for the low success rate of student learning because this method tends to have students relying on professors more and more. The majority of students in my study expressed concern about the quality of online education, and this concern is cited by (Irvin et al., 2011), who claim that quality is a pressing issue. *"Through these online programs, we are just going from one semester to the next, but our level of education has worsened," a different student remarked. Online classes suffer from a lack of attention as well. (Participant-C, Google Classroom, March 15, 2021).*

The following studies also lend credence to this opinion. Online education is inferior to conventional face-to-face instruction in terms of quality. Peers cannot cooperate with one another in learning if the system is not designed to actively facilitate this. When online learning is the only choice, the effects of bad learning design are more obvious (Arviso, 2019). Marcia's studies of online courses in some institutions revealed a 45% dropout rate due to a lack of assistance from the institution, but only 11% of face-to-face students experienced the same problem (Ryan et al., 2016). However, it is anticipated that the face-to-face component of the blended learning approach would compensate for the quality gap that online education is thought to have. The vast majority of my participants shared this opinion.

In this study, the majority of students agreed that blended learning will enhance learning and raise the standard of education. The majority also agreed that the opportunities and advantages the blended method offers students Higher-order learning, technical proficiency, and enhanced learning are presumed to guarantee improved learning using the blended learning approach, even though all participants agreed that face-to-face instruction is the most effective of the three. Student F said, *Students will benefit more from blended learning since they can participate in both in-person and virtual learning. They will need to make the most of their combined knowledge and expertise from both sources."* (Participant-F, Interview, 20 June 2021). Research shows that blended learning ensures a better quality of education for the use of technology in teaching-learning. According to Wornyo et al. (2018), as newer technologies get involved in education through blended learning, learners report that the learning experience is better and more useful because the learning purposes are met through improved learning skills with a greater emphasis on reflective experiences with the face-to-face classes. The results of Nasser's (2020) study also showed that the blended approach successfully fosters the development of the following crucial qualities: critical thinking, social skills, motivation, accessibility, and visualization. In their study, Margolis et al (2017) also discuss the use of in-class exercises that may be applied to problems in the real world of the twenty-first century.

4.1.6. Use of Technology

The majority of students said that the technology used for doing the blended course was simple. They could comfortably use the technology for doing the course. Half of the students were comfortable with using this new technology whereas the remaining participants said that they had initial hurdles but they could overcome them very easily. Student G said, *"Initially I had a problem in using new technology. I have learned to write an essay by myself without memorizing."* (Participant-G, Interview 21 June 2021). A student wrote in Google Classroom, *"I felt very confident when I saw that I could easily handle the online platforms, devices and apps for doing the course after a few days in to the course. Initially I had problem with using the platforms but after a week's use, I got confident about my skill."* (Google Classroom post, 12 July). The teacher also reported the students' comfort in using technology for doing the blended course.

Teacher-1 said, *"By using different platforms such as Google classroom, Facebook, WhatsApp, blogs, students sought any support and could reach out to teachers which is not possible in face-to-face classes. Giving and getting instant feedback through these media was beneficial for them."* (Teacher-1, Interview, 1 July 2021). This phenomenon is reflective of the fact that students have the adaptability and natural skills to adopt any new technology that is requisite for doing a blended and online course. Self-exploration and self-learning through critical thinking are the most valuable qualities of 21st-century graduates.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study shows that the majority of students interacted more effectively in the blended course. They were pleased that they could communicate with peers through both face-to-face and online means, and they could receive peer comments while they wrote their essays online. The study also shows that using a blended approach gave students greater teacher input. Another significant finding of the study was that students were engaged in a greater variety of learning activities while using a blended learning approach as opposed to simply face-to-face or exclusively online instruction. In comparison to face-to-face and online sessions, they claimed that using technology for the blended method's online lessons had improved their technological and problem-solving abilities.

Regarding the quality of education, all participants opined the blended method also ensures more quality of education by enhancing learning. Since people have negative perception of online education, it was believed that the blended learning approach would compensate for its drawbacks by helping students through peer and teacher support during the face-to-face course components. Everyone agreed that Bangladesh's digital divide was a barrier to online education. Although not on the same scale, it might be a similar problem with the blended method. All participants agreed, however, that face-to-face instruction might not be affected by the digital

divide Therefore, a blended learning program can help to mitigate the effects of the digital divide because in the blended method, half or at least 35-40 percent of the total classes will be held face-to-face. However, both online and blended education will be less expensive than in-person instruction, assuming the device and internet issues are resolved. It won't be a major issue if institutions or the government offers devices and internet access to students at a discounted price.

5.1. Implications of the Research

This research will inform the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) which has already formulated blended learning strategic plan for Bangladeshi universities and other stakeholders of higher education in Bangladesh to realize the efficacy of blended method as an effective method for higher education of Bangladesh.

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Md Khaled Bin Chowdhury (Conceptualization; Formal analysis Writing)
Fariza Puteh Behak (Conceptualization; Writing; Supervision)

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

ETHICS STATEMENT

Not available

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