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BLENDING LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAMME AT THE POSTS AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY: AN ANALYSIS OF COURSE DESIGN AND CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the blended learning model that underpins the general English programme at the Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology (PTIT), Vietnam. In this programme, each course combines a substantial block of self-paced online study on a commercial platform (English Discoveries or the TOEIC Official Learning and Preparation Course) with classroom sessions led by a teacher, and the whole sequence is oriented towards TOEIC benchmarks and the B1 exit level of the Common European Framework of Reference (Level 3 of Vietnam's Six-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework). Adopting a qualitative document-analysis design (Bowen, 2009), the study analyses three official course syllabi — Course 2, Course 3 and Course 3 Plus — through Neumeier's (2005) six parameters for blended language learning environments, supplemented by Moore's (1989) typology of interaction and the principle of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996). The analysis identifies five features of the current design: a balanced-to-online-weighted distribution of study time; a sequential "online input – classroom reinforcement" model of integration that moves towards parallel, theme-matched integration in Course 3 Plus; a strong orientation of content towards receptive skills and test formats; an assessment regime in which online completion and online test scores act as gatekeeping conditions for the final examination; and a redistribution of roles in which learners carry more responsibility for input and teachers act increasingly as reviewers and coaches. These features constitute clear strengths in terms of exposure time, flexibility, standardisation and alignment with institutional outcomes. At the same time, they create risks: compliance-driven online work, weak integration of productive skills, limited learner–learner interaction, and positive or negative washback from the TOEIC orientation. The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening integration, assessment and learner support, and outlines an agenda for empirical evaluation of the model.

Keywords: Blended Learning; English as a Foreign Language; Course Design; Online Learning Platforms; TOEIC; Learner Autonomy; Higher Education in Vietnam; PTIT

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, blended learning — the deliberate combination of face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated, usually online, learning (Graham, 2006) — has moved from the periphery of higher education to its centre.

Dziuban et al. (2018) describe it as “the new normal” for universities, while in English language teaching (ELT) it has long been regarded as a means of extending exposure to the target language beyond the limited number of hours available in class (Sharma & Barrett, 2007; Hockly, 2018). The appeal of the model is easy to understand: it promises the flexibility and individualisation of online study together with the human contact, feedback and communicative practice that only a classroom can easily provide.

In Vietnam, the move towards blended English instruction has been driven by both policy and practical pressures. National policy requires university graduates to reach a specified foreign language standard, commonly Level 3 of the Six-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework for Vietnam, which corresponds to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2014; Council of Europe, 2001). Universities must deliver this standard to large and heterogeneous cohorts within a credit system that leaves little room for additional contact hours. A blended design, in which a significant part of language input and practice is moved online, is an obvious response to this tension.

The Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology (PTIT) offers a clear example of this response. Its general English programme is organised as a sequence of courses, each of which combines a fixed number of online learning hours on a commercial platform with face-to-face sessions in which teachers review, reinforce and extend the online content. The programme is benchmarked against the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), with entry and target scores defined for every course and a final exit level equivalent to B1 / 450 TOEIC. Because the model has been in place for several cohorts and now forms part of the evidence base for programme accreditation, it is timely to examine it systematically: what kind of blend does the programme actually implement, and under what conditions is it likely to be effective?

Research on blended learning shows that its benefits are neither automatic nor uniform. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that blended conditions tend to produce learning outcomes at least comparable to, and often modestly better than, purely face-to-face instruction (Means et al., 2013), but the advantage depends heavily on design: on how well the two modes are integrated, on the quality of interaction, and on learners’ capacity for self-regulated study (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Zimmerman, 2002). In language learning specifically, Neumeier (2005) argues that the decisive question is not whether a course is blended but how its components are distributed and connected. Evaluating a blended programme therefore begins with a careful reading of its design.

- The present study undertakes such a reading. Its aims are to:
- Describe the blended learning model of the PTIT general English programme as documented in its official course syllabi.
- Analyse the model using an established framework of parameters for blended language learning environments.
- Identify the strengths of the current design and the risks that may limit its effectiveness.
- Propose practical recommendations for course design, assessment and teaching, and an agenda for empirical evaluation.

By focusing on the design layer, the study aims to provide a systematic basis on which subsequent empirical work — on learners’ experiences, teachers’ practices and test outcomes — can build.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Blended learning: definitions and models

Graham (2006, p. 5) defines blended learning systems as those that “combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction”, and distinguishes between blends at the activity, course, programme and institutional levels. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) emphasise that a genuine blend is more than the addition of online material to a conventional course: it is a thoughtful integration of classroom and online experiences that reorganises how time, content and interaction are used. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) extend this view in the Community of Inquiry framework, arguing that effective blended courses must sustain cognitive, social and teaching presence across both modes.

Within ELT, Sharma and Barrett (2007) describe blended learning as a course that combines a face-to-face classroom component with an appropriate use of technology, and caution that technology should serve pedagogical purposes rather than define them. Bax (2003) adds the notion of “normalisation”: technology becomes most useful when it is so integrated into practice that it is no longer seen as special. Hockly (2018) notes that, in practice, many institutional blends in ELT take the form of a published or commercial online course running alongside classroom teaching, which raises particular questions of alignment between the two components.

2.2 Neumeier's parameters for blended language learning

Neumeier (2005) proposes six parameters for describing and designing blended language learning environments. These parameters, summarised below, provide the main analytical framework for this study:

- **Mode:** the modes involved (face-to-face and computer-mediated), which mode is the lead mode, and how much time is allocated to each.
- **Model of integration:** the sequencing of modes (sequential or parallel) and the level of integration between them.
- **Distribution of learning content and objectives:** which skills, content and objectives are allocated to which mode.
- **Language teaching methods:** the methods and activity types employed in each mode.
- **Involvement of learning subjects:** the roles and interaction patterns of learners and teachers (learner–learner, learner–teacher, learner–content).
- **Location:** where learning takes place, for example in classrooms, computer laboratories or at home.

2.3 Interaction, autonomy and alignment

Three further concepts inform the analysis. First, Moore (1989) distinguishes three types of interaction in technology-mediated learning: learner–content, learner–instructor and learner–learner. Commercial online language platforms are typically strong in learner–content interaction but provide limited opportunities for the other two types, which must therefore be supplied by the classroom. Second, self-paced online study places demands on learner autonomy, defined by Holec (1981) as the ability to take charge of one's own learning, and on self-regulation — the setting of goals, monitoring of progress and management of effort (Zimmerman, 2002; Benson, 2011). Third, Biggs's (1996) principle of constructive alignment holds that intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks should be mutually consistent. Where assessment emphasises some outcomes more than others, the content of teaching is likely to follow, a phenomenon known in language testing as washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Messick, 1996; Cheng et al., 2004).

2.4 Blended, test-oriented English programmes in Vietnamese universities

The PTIT model belongs to a broader pattern in Vietnamese higher education, in which non-major English programmes are organised around an externally recognised proficiency test and a national exit standard. Since the issuance of the Six-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework (MOET, 2014), many universities have expressed their graduation requirement either as a framework level or as an equivalent score on an international test such as TOEIC, IELTS or TOEFL. This has two consequences for course design. First, the target of instruction becomes highly visible and measurable, which helps learners and institutions plan. Second, the format of the chosen test tends to shape the curriculum: courses are sequenced by score bands, materials are selected for their alignment with test parts, and classroom time is allocated to test strategies.

Commercial online platforms fit easily into such programmes. They provide a ready-made, levelled sequence of units, automatic scoring and progress reports, and — in the case of test-specific platforms — practice items in the format of the target test. They also allow institutions to standardise the input that learners receive across many classes and teachers. Yet the literature reviewed above suggests that such platforms deliver mainly learner–content interaction and controlled practice. The value of the classroom component in a blend of this kind therefore depends on whether it supplies what the platform cannot: interaction, feedback on production, adaptation to learners' needs, and the development of strategies for independent study. The present analysis examines the PTIT syllabi with this question in mind.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

The study adopts a qualitative design based on document analysis, which Bowen (2009) describes as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents in order to elicit meaning and develop empirical knowledge. Document analysis is particularly suitable for examining curricula, since syllabi are official statements of intended practice: they show how an institution plans to distribute time, content, activities and assessment. The design is descriptive and evaluative rather than experimental. It does not measure learning outcomes; instead, it identifies the features of the model and assesses them against principles established in the research literature.

3.2 Data sources

The data consist of three official syllabi of the PTIT general English programme:

- **Course 2 Syllabus** (English, entry 150+ TOEIC, target 225+ TOEIC), using English Discoveries (ED) Basic 2 and half of Basic 3 online with the corresponding ED workbook, lesson plans and handouts in class.
- **Course 3 Syllabus** (English, entry 225 TOEIC, target 300+ TOEIC), using ED half of Basic 3 and Intermediate 1 online, with ED materials and *TOEIC Preparation LC + RC Volume 1* in class, plus supplementary materials compiled by IIG Vietnam.
- **Course 3 Plus detailed syllabus** (*Đề cương chi tiết học phần Tiếng Anh 3+*, Vietnamese), using the TOEIC Official Learning and Preparation Course (OLPC) Modules 2 and 3 developed by ETS online, with *Pass the TOEIC Test – Introductory Course* in class. This syllabus states the programme exit level of B1 / Level 3 / 450 TOEIC.

Taken together, the three documents cover the intermediate stretch of the programme and include a revised course (Course 3 Plus) that replaces the general English platform with a TOEIC-specific one. This allows the analysis to observe not only the model at one point but also the direction in which it is developing.

3.3 Procedure of analysis

Following Bowen (2009), the analysis proceeded in three stages. In the first stage (skimming), each syllabus was read in full to identify its structure: objectives, materials, time allocation, weekly content and assessment. In the second stage (close reading), relevant passages were coded deductively against Neumeier's (2005) six parameters, with additional codes for interaction types (Moore, 1989) and for the alignment of objectives and assessment (Biggs, 1996). In the third stage (interpretation), the coded data were compared across the three courses to identify common features, changes between courses, and points of tension. Quotations from the Vietnamese syllabus are translated by the author.

3.4 Trustworthiness

To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, the coding categories were derived from published frameworks rather than created ad hoc, and every claim reported in the findings is traceable to a specific section of a syllabus (time allocation, materials, weekly plan or assessment table). Where the documents are silent on a feature — for example, on pair or group work — the findings report this as an absence in the documented design rather than as evidence about classroom practice. The author's position as a member of the teaching staff provided familiarity with the context, which assisted interpretation; at the same time, it called for care to distinguish what the syllabi specify from what individual teachers may do in their own classes.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Mode and distribution of study time

All three courses run over a fifteen-week semester and combine two modes: self-paced online study on a commercial platform and teacher-led classroom sessions. Table 1 summarises the time allocation stated in each syllabus.

Table 1: Mode and time allocation in the three courses

Feature	Course 2	Course 3	Course 3 Plus
Online platform	English Discoveries Basic 2 (Units 1–10) + ½ Basic 3 (Units 1–5)	English Discoveries ½ Basic 3 (Units 6–10) + Intermediate 1	TOEIC OLPC Modules 2 & 3 (ETS)
Online time	4 hours/week × 15 weeks = 60 hours	4 hours/week × 15 weeks = 60 hours	~3 hours/week × 15 weeks ≈ 45 hours
Face-to-face time	2 sessions/week × 2 credit hours × 15 weeks = 60 hours	2 sessions/week × 2 credit hours × 15 weeks = 60 hours	1 session/week × 2 credit hours × 15 weeks = 30 hours
Approximate online share	50%	50%	≈ 60%

Classroom materials	ED Workbook, lesson plans, handouts	ED Workbook; TOEIC Preparation LC + RC Vol. 1; IIG supplements	Pass the TOEIC Test – Introductory Course
Target	225+ TOEIC	300+ TOEIC	B1 / Level 3 / 450 TOEIC

Source: compiled by the author from the Course 2, Course 3 and Course 3 Plus syllabi.

Two observations follow. First, in Courses 2 and 3 the two modes have equal weight: 60 online hours and 60 face-to-face hours. In Neumeier's (2005) terms, neither mode is clearly the lead mode by time, although, as shown below, the online component functions as the lead mode for content, since classroom sessions are organised around it. Second, Course 3 Plus shifts the balance: classroom time is halved to one session per week, while online time is reduced less sharply, so that the online mode accounts for roughly three-fifths of the scheduled study time. The total scheduled time also falls from about 120 hours to about 75 hours. The change suggests an institutional move towards a more online-weighted blend, in which learners are expected to carry a larger share of the learning load independently.

This distribution has a clear rationale. For learners at elementary to pre-intermediate levels, sheer exposure to input is a precondition for progress, and online study allows that exposure to be increased without proportionate increases in teaching staff or rooms. However, the reduction of classroom time in Course 3 Plus also concentrates the functions of the classroom — feedback, interaction, speaking practice and test strategy — into thirty hours, which places considerable pressure on each session.

4.2 Model of integration

The syllabi reveal two different models of integration. In Course 2, the weekly plan follows a strictly sequential pattern. Each week, learners complete one ED unit online (for example, "Basic 2 – Unit 2: Healthy Eating", with listening, reading, dialogue, grammar and vocabulary components). The two classroom sessions then revisit that unit: Session 1 reviews and reinforces vocabulary, and Session 2 reviews and reinforces grammar, using the ED workbook and numbered handouts. The classroom is thus explicitly designed as a follow-up to online input — a model that may be described as "online input, classroom reinforcement".

Course 3 retains this pattern for one session per week (Session 1, "ED Review") but devotes the second session to TOEIC practice using a separate textbook (*TOEIC Preparation LC + RC Volume 1*). In this second session the content is organised by TOEIC parts and grammar points (for example, Part 1 photographs, Part 2 question–response, and Part 5–7 practice on nouns and pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, verb tenses, and the passive voice) rather than by the themes of the ED unit studied online the same week. Course 3 therefore combines a tightly integrated strand (ED online + ED review) with a parallel, largely independent strand (classroom TOEIC practice). The relationship between the two strands is one of shared language focus at the level of grammar rather than of shared content.

Course 3 Plus shows a more consciously parallel design. In the first week, for example, the classroom session introduces TOEIC Part 1 (Photographs) and Part 5–6 word choice from *Pass the TOEIC Test*, while the online OLPC unit for the same week ("Module 2, Unit 1: Personnel") includes a TOEIC section on "Preparing for Part 1: Photographs – focusing on the language of descriptions". The online and classroom components are thus matched by test part, even though their thematic content differs. This is closer to what Garrison and Kanuka (2004) call a thoughtful integration: the two modes address the same target from different angles within the same week.

The development from Course 2 to Course 3 Plus therefore represents a move from a reinforcement model, in which the classroom repeats the online material, towards a complementary model, in which the classroom extends it. Each has advantages. The reinforcement model is predictable and helps weaker learners consolidate the content. The complementary model makes better use of scarce classroom time, but it depends on learners having actually completed the online work before class — an assumption that, as Section 4.5 shows, the programme attempts to secure through assessment.

4.3 Distribution of content, objectives and skills

The stated objectives of all three courses refer to the four skills. Course 2 aims to equip students with "vocabulary and grammar structures and functions as well as language skills (Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing) needed for different parts of the test", and Course 3 adds that it "creates a balance between English language skills acquisition and TOEIC practice". The Course 3 Plus syllabus provides detailed can-do statements for each skill, closely modelled on the B1 descriptors of the CEFR and the Vietnamese framework, including speaking objectives such as handling short social exchanges, narrating experiences, and expressing opinions on cultural topics, and writing objectives such as writing simple connected texts and e-mails.

The distribution of these objectives across modes, however, is uneven, as Table 2 shows.

Table 2: Distribution of skills across modes

Skill	Online component	Face-to-face component
Listening	Core of each ED/OLPC unit (listening texts, dialogues); OLPC TOEIC Parts 1–4	TOEIC Parts 1–4 practice (Courses 3, 3 Plus); review of ED listening texts (Course 2)
Reading	Core of each unit (reading texts, e-mails, notices); OLPC TOEIC Parts 5–7	TOEIC Parts 5–7 practice; reinforcement of ED reading texts
Grammar & vocabulary	Explicit grammar and vocabulary sections in every unit	Main focus of review sessions (Course 2); grammar for Part 5–6 (Courses 3, 3 Plus)
Speaking	ED “Record yourself and send to Teacher” (Course 2); OLPC speaking items (e.g. “New Manager”)	Not specified as a separate strand; “developed indirectly” (Course 3 Plus)
Writing	Limited; embedded in platform exercises	Not specified as a separate strand; “developed indirectly” (Course 3 Plus)

Source: compiled by the author from the weekly plans of the three syllabi.

Receptive skills, grammar and vocabulary are well represented in both modes and are closely tied to the TOEIC Listening and Reading test. Productive skills are less visible. The Course 2 syllabus includes a weekly speaking task, “Record yourself and send to Teacher”, in which learners record two sentences taken from the unit’s listening text (for instance, “I’m trying to get to the art museum. Can you give me directions?”). This is a useful pronunciation and fluency exercise, but it is essentially repetition rather than spontaneous production. The Course 3 Plus syllabus is explicit about the approach: “Through access to knowledge and practice of the two receptive skills, Listening and Reading, students are expected to develop the productive skills of Speaking and Writing on their own and indirectly” (translated by the author).

There is therefore a gap between the stated objectives, which include a substantial set of B1 speaking and writing outcomes, and the planned activities, which allocate little explicit time to them in either mode. In terms of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996), the speaking and writing outcomes are not matched by corresponding teaching activities or assessment tasks. This is not unusual in test-oriented programmes, but it is an important point for both pedagogy and accreditation, since accreditors typically look for evidence that each stated outcome is taught and assessed.

4.4 Teaching methods and activity types

Online, the methods are those built into the commercial platforms: presentation of authentic-style texts (listening, reading and dialogues), followed by comprehension items, explicit grammar explanation with controlled practice, vocabulary exercises and, in OLPC, TOEIC-format practice with strategy tips. These are primarily individual, self-paced and automatically scored activities. Their strengths are consistency, immediate feedback and the opportunity for repetition; their limitations are the narrow range of response types and the absence of negotiated meaning.

In class, the syllabi specify a fairly regular lesson structure: homework checking (15 minutes in Courses 3 and 3 Plus), review of vocabulary or grammar, reinforcement exercises using handouts or textbook units, and TOEIC practice with homework from “actual questions” for Parts 5–7. Course 3 includes ED review tests at intervals, and Course 3 Plus includes course introduction and test-strategy components (“Try it out”, “Improve your performance”). The methods described are largely accuracy-focused and test-preparation oriented. Communicative or task-based activities such as role plays, discussions and projects are not specified, although teachers are free to include them within the review sessions.

4.5 Assessment and the gatekeeping role of the online component

The most distinctive feature of the Course 3 Plus syllabus is its assessment regime, summarised in Table 3.

Online results are not weighted in the course grade. Instead, they function as a gatekeeping condition: students who do not meet all the online thresholds, or the attendance threshold, “are not allowed to take the final examination and must retake the course” (translated by the author). This design has a clear logic. In a complementary model of integration, the classroom depends on learners arriving prepared; making online completion a condition for the final examination is a strong mechanism for ensuring that the online mode is not neglected. It also gives the online component high status, in contrast to many blended courses in which online work is perceived as optional.

The design nevertheless raises several issues. First, the thresholds are demanding: an average of 80/100 on unit and mid-term tests, and 450/990 on each online final test — the same figure as the programme’s exit benchmark. Learners

who reach the exit standard in the online final test but score lower in the course examinations would pass the gate yet fail the course, and the reverse case is excluded altogether. Second, completion and scores measure product, not process. Where high stakes are attached to automatically scored online tasks, learners may adopt surface strategies — repeated attempts, guessing, or sharing answers — that satisfy the thresholds without producing the intended learning. Third, both scored components (mid-term and final) are paper-based Listening and Reading tests in TOEIC format. Speaking and writing are not assessed, which reinforces the imbalance identified in Section 4.3 through washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993).

Table 3: Assessment components in Course 3 Plus

Component	Weight	Requirement
(a) Online learning results (OLPC)	Condition	At least 80% completion of each module; unit test average $\geq 80/100$; each mid-term test $\geq 80/100$; each final test $\geq 450/990$
(b) Attendance	10%	Active participation; attendance at $\geq 80\%$ of face-to-face sessions (minimum 12 sessions)
(c) Mid-term test	40%	Paper-based TOEIC-format test, 120 minutes (Listening ~45 minutes, Reading 75 minutes), after week 7
(d) Final test	50%	Paper-based TOEIC-format test, 120 minutes, after week 15

Source: Course 3 Plus detailed syllabus (translated and summarised by the author).

4.6 Involvement of learners and teachers, and location

In Moore's (1989) terms, the online component provides intensive learner–content interaction, while learner–instructor interaction is concentrated in the classroom and, in Course 2, in the recorded speaking task sent to the teacher. Learner–learner interaction is not planned in either mode: the platforms are individual, and the classroom activities described are mainly whole-class review and individual practice. The Course 3 Plus syllabus does include among its general outcomes the ability to “work independently or in groups to solve learning problems assigned by the teacher” and to “manage time well to complete and submit assignments on time”, which acknowledges the importance of autonomy and collaboration, but the weekly plan does not specify how these are developed.

The teacher's role is consequently reshaped. Rather than being the main source of input, the teacher becomes a reviewer of online content, a provider of test strategies and a monitor of online progress. Learners, in turn, are expected to manage four hours (or about three hours in Course 3 Plus) of independent online study per week. In terms of location, online study takes place wherever learners have access to a device and connection, typically at home or in dormitories, while classroom sessions take place on campus. This flexibility is a clear benefit for students at a technology institute, who generally have good access to devices, but it also means that the quality of online study depends on conditions that the institution does not control.

4.7 Summary of the model

Table 4 brings the findings together by profiling the PTIT model against Neumeier's (2005) six parameters and indicating the direction of change from Courses 2 and 3 to Course 3 Plus.

Table 4: Profile of the PTIT blended model according to Neumeier's (2005) parameters

Parameter	Courses 2 and 3	Course 3 Plus
Mode	Online and face-to-face equal in time (60 + 60 hours); online is lead mode for content	Online-weighted ($\approx 45 + 30$ hours); online remains lead mode for content
Model of integration	Sequential: online unit followed by classroom review (Course 2); review strand plus parallel TOEIC strand (Course 3)	Parallel and complementary: online and classroom matched by TOEIC part each week
Distribution of content	Grammar, vocabulary and receptive skills in both modes; speaking limited to recorded repetition	Receptive skills and TOEIC formats in both modes; speaking and writing “developed indirectly”
Teaching methods	Platform presentation–practice online; review, reinforcement and test practice in class	Platform TOEIC practice with strategy tips online; test strategy and practice in class

Involvement of learning subjects	Learner–content (online) and learner–teacher (class); learner–learner not planned	Same pattern, with less classroom contact; online results act as gatekeeping condition
Location	Home/dormitory (online) and campus classroom	Home/dormitory (online) and campus classroom

Source: synthesised by the author from the analysis in Sections 4.1–4.6.

The profile shows a consistent underlying logic: the online component delivers structured input and controlled practice, the classroom consolidates and connects that input to the test, and assessment secures learners' engagement with both. The direction of change is towards a leaner, more test-focused and more online-weighted design, in which the two modes are more closely matched but the classroom carries fewer hours.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Strengths of the current model

Read against the literature, the PTIT model has several strengths. First, it substantially increases the amount of structured exposure to English. Sixty hours of online study per course, in addition to classroom time, is considerable for students whose entry level is elementary, and it is consistent with the view that blended designs are effective when they extend rather than replace contact with the language (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). Second, the programme is coherent and standardised. Each course has defined entry and target scores, fixed materials, and a week-by-week plan in which the two modes are explicitly linked. For a large institution with many teachers, this standardisation supports consistency across classes and makes the programme transparent for accreditation.

Third, the evolution towards the Course 3 Plus design shows a positive movement towards integration. Matching online and classroom work by TOEIC part within the same week allows classroom time to be used for extension and strategy rather than repetition, which is in line with Garrison and Kanuka's (2004) argument that blended learning should reorganise, not duplicate, learning activities. Fourth, the gatekeeping mechanism gives the online component real weight and addresses one of the most common weaknesses of blended courses, namely low completion of online work. Finally, the clear alignment between course targets, materials and the TOEIC Listening and Reading format supports learners in reaching the institutional exit requirement, an outcome of direct importance to them.

5.2 Risks and limitations

The same features, however, carry risks that may limit the effectiveness of the model. The first concerns compliance. When online completion and online scores are high-stakes conditions, learners may treat the platform as a set of boxes to be ticked. Zimmerman (2002) emphasises that self-regulated learners set goals, monitor understanding and adjust strategies; a threshold-driven system does not in itself develop these capacities and may even discourage them if learners focus on reaching 80% rather than on learning. The programme's outcomes in time management and independent work would be better served by explicit support for self-regulation.

The second risk concerns productive skills. The syllabi state B1 speaking and writing outcomes but rely on indirect development. Research on washback suggests that what is assessed tends to dominate what is taught (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng et al., 2004). Since neither online nor classroom assessment includes speaking or writing, there is little incentive for teachers or learners to prioritise them. The result may be graduates who reach 450 on the TOEIC Listening and Reading test but are less able to use English actively in professional contexts — an important concern for an institute whose graduates work in the information and communication technology sector, where spoken and written English are increasingly required.

The third risk concerns interaction. Learner–learner interaction, a key element of social presence in the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), is largely absent from the documented design. Online platforms of the kind used here are not designed for it, and the classroom, with its emphasis on review and test practice, does not plan for it. In Course 3 Plus, where classroom time is reduced to thirty hours, the opportunity for spoken interaction in English becomes particularly scarce.

The fourth risk concerns the teacher's role. Teachers whose classroom time is spent checking homework, reviewing platform content and practising test items may find their professional role narrowed. Hockly (2018) notes that the success of institutional blends depends heavily on teachers' understanding of, and ownership over, the online component. If teachers cannot see detailed data on their students' online work, or do not have time to respond to it, the link between the two modes weakens, and the classroom cannot address the difficulties that learners encounter online.

A fifth, more structural point concerns the reduction of total study time in Course 3 Plus from about 120 to about 75 scheduled hours, while the target rises from 300+ to 450 TOEIC. This does not necessarily imply a problem, since the OLPC materials are more closely targeted at the test, but it does mean that the course relies heavily on learners' unscheduled independent study and on the efficiency of each classroom session. Whether the redesigned course achieves comparable or better outcomes with less scheduled time is an empirical question that the programme should monitor.

5.3 Implications for programme accreditation

The analysis also has implications for the documentation of the programme in accreditation processes, which typically require institutions to show that expected learning outcomes are clearly stated, that teaching and learning activities enable learners to achieve them, and that assessment measures their achievement. On the first point, the Course 3 Plus syllabus is strong: its outcomes are detailed, skill-specific and explicitly linked to the B1 level and the Vietnamese framework. On the second and third points, the documents are strong for listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary, where outcomes, online and classroom activities, and paper-based tests are clearly aligned.

For speaking, writing, collaboration and time management, however, the chain of evidence is incomplete. These outcomes are stated but are not linked to specified activities or assessment tasks. Two responses are possible. The programme may revise the outcomes so that they describe what the courses actually teach and assess, positioning the development of productive skills in other parts of the curriculum. Alternatively, and preferably in view of graduates' professional needs, it may add explicit activities and at least light-touch assessment for these outcomes, as recommended below. In either case, an outcomes–activities–assessment matrix for each course, using the categories of Table 2 and Table 3, would provide clear evidence of alignment. Online platform reports on completion and scores, which the programme already collects as a gatekeeping condition, could also serve as systematic evidence of learners' engagement and progress across cohorts.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed for consideration by the department:

- **Strengthen integration through data.** Give teachers regular access to platform reports (completion, scores and common errors) and reserve a short part of each session for addressing the problems identified, so that the classroom responds to what learners actually did online.
- **Rebalance productive skills.** Build a short, recurring speaking or writing task into each classroom session (for example, a role play, a short presentation or an e-mail linked to the week's TOEIC theme), and consider including a small speaking or writing component in the course assessment, in line with the stated B1 outcomes.
- **Plan learner-learner interaction.** Use pair and group tasks in class and, where possible, simple online collaborative activities (discussion forums or shared documents) to build social presence across both modes.
- **Support self-regulated learning.** Introduce a learning plan or log at the start of the course, brief in-class reflection on progress, and guidance on effective platform use, so that the 80% threshold becomes a minimum rather than a goal.
- **Review the gatekeeping thresholds.** Consider allowing partial weighting of online results in the course grade, or offering a recovery opportunity for learners who narrowly miss the thresholds, in order to reduce the incentive for surface strategies while maintaining the importance of the online component.
- **Connect content with the learners' field.** Supplement general TOEIC themes with occasional tasks related to technology, media and communication, which would increase motivation and relevance for PTIT students.
- **Support teachers.** Provide professional development on blended teaching and on using platform data, and involve teachers in reviewing the alignment of online and classroom materials each year.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has analysed the blended learning model of the PTIT general English programme through three official syllabi, using Neumeier's (2005) parameters together with the concepts of interaction, autonomy and constructive alignment. The model combines substantial self-paced online study on commercial platforms with teacher-led classroom sessions, all oriented towards TOEIC benchmarks and the B1 exit level. Its main features are an equal, and increasingly online-weighted, distribution of time; a shift from sequential reinforcement to parallel, test-part-matched integration; a strong focus on receptive skills, grammar and vocabulary; an assessment regime in which online results act as a gate to the final examination; and a redistribution of roles that places more responsibility on learners.

These features give the programme important strengths: extended exposure, flexibility, standardisation, clear alignment with institutional outcomes, and a credible mechanism for ensuring that online work is completed. At the same time, the analysis suggests that the effectiveness of the model depends on conditions that the documents do not

yet fully address: meaningful rather than compliance-driven online study, explicit development and assessment of speaking and writing, planned learner–learner interaction, and teachers' active use of information from the online component. The recommendations offered here aim to strengthen these conditions without abandoning the advantages of the existing design.

The study has limitations. As a document analysis, it describes the intended curriculum rather than the curriculum as enacted in classrooms or experienced by learners; actual practice may differ from what the syllabi specify, and teachers may already compensate for some of the gaps identified. The analysis also covers three courses rather than the full programme. Future research should therefore combine this design-level analysis with empirical data: surveys and interviews with students and teachers on their experience of the two modes; analysis of platform usage data in relation to examination results; and comparison of outcomes between Course 3 and Course 3 Plus cohorts. Such evidence would allow the institution to evaluate not only how its blended model is designed, but how effectively it works in practice.

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