

Blended Learning in Under-Resourced Contexts: Insights From Chinese EFL Students in a Local College Context

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Abstract—As blended learning has become prevalent in higher education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, there remains a lack of empirical research focusing on perspectives and experiences of students in under-resourced and underrepresented contexts. This research examines EFL students' perceptions of blended learning in a Chinese local college, where technological integration and instructional innovation often face contextual challenges. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study surveyed 230 undergraduate students and conducted in-depth interviews with 16 participants to explore their attitudes, readiness, and competence as blended learning users, as well as their perceptions of instructional design, learning technologies, and teacher feedback in blended EFL courses. The findings reveal that while students generally had favorable views of blended learning, they also encountered significant challenges including heavy workloads, weak self-regulation, technological barriers, and limited theoretical knowledge of blended learning. The research highlights the importance of instructional support, teacher training, infrastructure development, and pedagogical balance to optimize the implementation of blended learning in EFL contexts. Implications are offered for teachers, administrators, and policymakers aiming to enhance blended learning effectiveness, particularly in local and resource-constrained college settings.

Index Terms—blended learning, EFL, language teaching, language learning, student perceptions, Chinese local college

I. INTRODUCTION

Since online learning became the primary mode of education during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing shift towards blended learning approach, or the idea of integrating online and offline instruction (Wu & Luo, 2022). Blended learning approach has gained popularity among both teachers and students, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education (Horn & Staker, 2017). In Chinese colleges, blended learning has also been widely adopted to enhance EFL instruction by combining the strengths of both online and offline learning modes. Blended learning addresses various EFL educational challenges in China, such as increased language learning demands and limited classroom time by offering flexible, resource-rich online learning tailored to individual needs (Li et al., 2019). At the same time, it preserves the benefits of face-to-face interaction and timely teacher feedback, fostering deeper learning and supporting students' socio-emotional development (Shoukat et al., 2024).

The implementation of blended learning approach across Chinese higher education institutions varies significantly in both scope and quality, largely due to contextual factors such as geographic location and resource availability. However, most studies focused on blended learning implementation in colleges in central or metropolitan regions, examining areas such as the effectiveness of blended learning in foreign language education, factors influencing student performance, and the limitations of blended learning environments in China (Jiang, 2022; Wang & Zhang, 2022; Yang et al., 2023). Relatively little attention has been given to local or regional colleges. Due to remote locality and unbalanced financial support, the local colleges adopted the blended learning model much later than the metropolitan counterparts, and there are much more challenges and difficulties for the local college teachers to integrate technology with EFL learning (Luo, 2022). This delayed adoption and the resulting challenges may explain the scarcity of research on blended learning in local college contexts.

Given the importance of understanding blended learning in under-researched settings, this research seeks to address this gap by exploring the perceptions of Chinese students at a local college toward blended EFL learning, including their perceptions of themselves as blended learning users and perceptions of other dimensions underlining blended learning.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Blended Learning Models in Language Education

Blended learning, as an approach in second and a foreign language education, has been defined in various ways. However, most scholars view that it must involve the strategic integration of face-to-face classroom instruction with online learning activities to combine the strengths of both modalities. The primary aim is to maximize resource utilization and enhance instructional effectiveness (Cronje, 2020; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Various models of blended learning have also been developed based on different criteria, such as the degree of online integration, student autonomy, and instructional design. In recent development, Horn and Staker (2017) proposed four main models of blended learning which are: rotation model, flex model, a la carte model, and enriched virtual model. These models have been applied across diverse educational contexts, including language education, and provide frameworks for designing blended learning environments. Among these, the *rotation model* is the most commonly implement in schools worldwide (Ashraf et al., 2022). The rotation model comprises four distinct sub-models, as outlined in Table 1 below, to support flexible movement through various instructional formats, including whole-class activities, small group work, individual lessons, and online tasks, which is believed to enhance learner engagement in language learning.

TABLE 1
BLENDED LEARNING MODEL

Rotation model: Learners rotate between working face-to-face with a teacher and online instruction based on a teacher-created schedule (Horn & Staker, 2017)	
A. Station Rotation	Students rotate between classroom activities, based on a designated time block, and online learning activities.
B. Lab Rotation	Students rotate between classrooms and computer labs, where they engage in online-learning activities.
C. Flipped Classroom	Students receive initial instruction through videos or online content outside the classroom (typically at home), and then engage in application tasks, collaboration, or extended learning during face-to-face class time.
D. Individual Rotation	Each student follows customized learning path based on individual own learning goals. They do not rotate but learn through personalized learning modes.

B. Advantages of Blended Learning

Blended learning offers a feasible solution to the limitations of both fully online and traditional classroom instruction by combining the strengths of each approach (Medina, 2018). Previous studies have highlighted its high flexibility as a key advantage—allowing teachers and learners to decide when, where, how learning takes place, and to select instructional designs and resources accordingly (Shoukat et al., 2024; Stap et al., 2024). Another major benefit is the vast amount of language input accessible through digital resources outside the classroom (Namyssova et al., 2019). Previous study findings have revealed that learners were generally satisfied with the blended approach of combining face-to-face teaching and online learning, and that blended learning could motivate students to engage in the language learning and interact more with teachers and peers on the learning system (Wong & Hwang, 2020). Blended learning has also been shown to enhance learner autonomy by promoting responsibility and self-directed learning (Banditvilai, 2016). In terms of skill development, research has found improvements in reading proficiency (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019), as well as grammar, spelling, and writing skills (Ashraf et al., 2022).

In China, most studies have shown that EFL educators, especially those in top-tier universities, have implemented blended learning using the rotation model to teach EFL and to manage large class size (Wang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2017). The implementation of blended learning emphasized student-centered learning, allowing learners to progress at their own pace and providing more opportunities for interaction in both online and face-to-face settings. In addition, the use of digital platforms supported formative assessment through built-in evaluation tools. However, the findings of blended learning implementation in China presented in the existing studies derived mostly from the investigation of top-tier universities in central areas, with limited evidence on how blended learning is implemented or perceived in local colleges.

C. Students' Perceptions of Blended Learning

Research on students' perceptions of blended learning consistently highlights its key advantages, such as its flexibility and rich resources. Moreover, students perceived the benefits of formative assessment and timely individual guidance and feedback in the blended learning (Sun & Qiu, 2017). However, many studies also identified challenges, particularly related to the online component. These include poorly designed instructional frameworks (Ashraf et al., 2022), a lack of digital literacy, and insufficient training for students to effectively navigate blended learning environments (Wang, 2021). Studies from Chinese scholars found similar results. While students generally express positive attitudes toward using mobile devices for language learning and are satisfied with the outcomes of blended learning, concerns remain regarding their capacity for self-regulated learning and the burden of excessive online tasks (Guo et al., 2020; Wu & Luo, 2022).

Recent studies also suggest a positive correlation between students' perception of blended learning and their willingness and readiness to adopt it in their learning. They reveal that today's college students tend to have positive

views toward technology in learning, they are quite digitally literate and internet-savvy, with high levels of e-learning readiness and frequent technology use (Osman et al., 2017; Pregoner & Baguio, 2024; Rashid et al., 2021).

In China, previous studies on the implementation of blended learning have also revealed that students are generally capable of adapting to this mode of learning, particularly those in top-tier universities located in central regions. However, few studies have explored the perspectives of EFL students in local colleges, despite their need to adjust to blended learning environments as well. This research, therefore, aims to fill this gap by examining the perceptions of EFL students in a local Chinese college where blended learning has been implemented. It explores students' perceptions of various dimensions of blended learning, as well as their self-perceptions as users of this approach—an area often overlooked in previous studies. Understanding how students view their roles and abilities in a blended environment is essential for designing more inclusive, supportive, and effective learning models tailored to diverse educational contexts.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, using questionnaires and focus group interviews to explore students' perceptions of blended learning. Details of the instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis are described below.

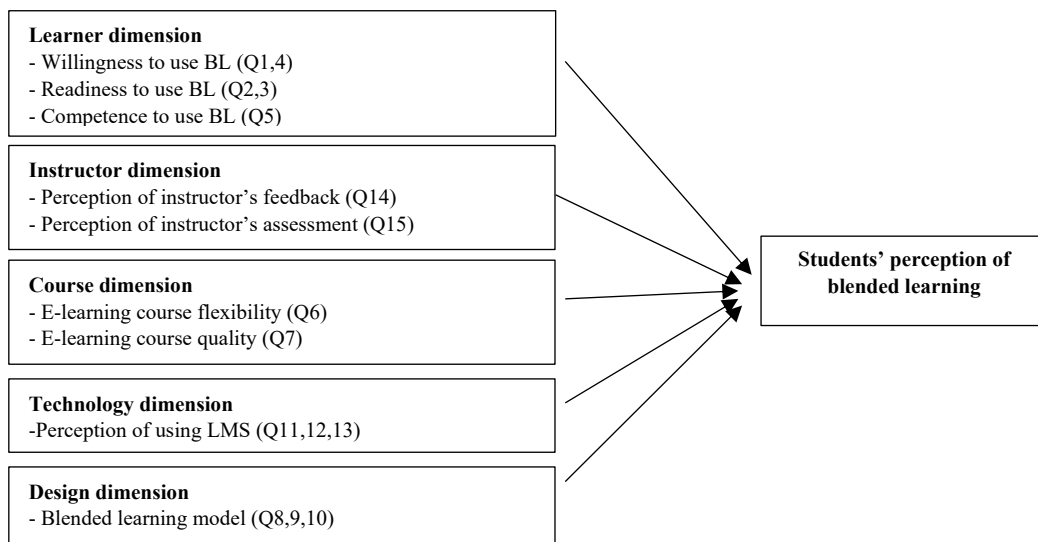
A. Participants

A purposive sampling method was used to select 230 non-English major EFL students enrolled in an English course at a local Chinese college. Additionally, 16 students voluntarily participated in four focus group interviews.

B. Data Collection

The data were collected using two instruments: students' questionnaires and focus group interviews. The questionnaire was administered via an online survey platform. It was comprised of two sections. The first section collected demographic information (e.g., gender, age, major, and duration of English learning). The second section included items covering five dimensions—learner, instructor, course, design, and technology—using a 5-point Likert scale (from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*). The questionnaire items were developed based on the review of relevant literature and previous studies (Ashraf et al., 2022; Osman & Hamzah, 2017; Wu & Luo, 2022; Yang et al., 2017), and were validated through expert review and a pilot test. Figure 1 illustrates the framework of these blended learning dimensions and the corresponding survey items.

Students' perceptions of themselves as blended learning users (e.g., willingness, readiness, and competence), and the other dimensions of blended learning, including their experiences of blended learning, instructional interaction, course structure, and the use of the learning management system (LMS), were further explored in more depth through the focus group interviews.



Note: Q = Questionnaire item

Figure 1. Dimensions of Blended Learning

C. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, i.e. means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*). The interview data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), which involves comparing one segment of data with another to identify similar responses. The data were then further analyzed, grouped into smaller topics, and organized into categories based on recurring themes.

IV. RESULTS

This section presents Chinese EFL students' perceptions of various dimensions of blended learning and its implementation. These dimensions include perceptions of themselves as users, as well as perceptions of the instructor, course, design, and technology.

A. Perceptions of Themselves as Blended Learning Users

Table 2 summarizes students' self-perceptions of their willingness, readiness, and competence in using blended learning.

TABLE 2
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEMSELVES AS BLENDED LEARNING USERS

Survey questions	N	Mean	SD
1. I prefer blended learning to traditional language learning method, since I am more engaged in blended learning and improve my language learning output.	230	4.28	.637
2. I have sufficient general knowledge of blended learning.	230	4.16	.984
3. I have sufficient knowledge about the theories of blended learning.	230	3.47	.992
4. I suffer a lot from pressure of blended learning in my college English, such as more work, and time commitment.	230	3.31	1.077
5. I am competent in using the learning management system.	230	3.96	.881

Most students preferred blended learning over traditional methods of EFL learning ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.637$). Regarding students' readiness to use blended learning, they reported having more general knowledge of blended learning ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.984$) than knowledge of its theoretical foundations ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.992$).

Interview data also reveal that most students were more engaged in the blended learning, and their language learning has been improved through this method. Those who were satisfied with blended learning noted that blended learning combined the strengths of face-to-face learning and online learning, with the flexible online learning and regular offline learning. Students reported that blended learning fostered greater motivation by offering learning materials for continuous and independent language practice, which greatly improved their language proficiency. One student reflected, "*The more I practice online, the more confident and proficient I become in my classroom presentations*".

Despite practical competence in using the LMS ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.881$), many students admitted lacking knowledge of blended learning theories and showed limited interest in acquiring it. As one student noted, "*I don't think it is difficult to use the learning platforms or locate useful resources. However, I have little knowledge of the theories relevant to blended learning, since my English teacher have never told us anything about that and I have no intention to study more because I don't think it is necessary*".

Finally, students also acknowledged challenges, particularly the increased workload and time required ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.077$). Some students described feeling overwhelmed by assignments and the difficulty of maintaining self-discipline during autonomous learning. The students with weak self-regulation found autonomous online learning challenging, because they were distracted by the games or videos on the internet. Technical issues, such as unstable internet connections, also contributed to their stress, as one student commented that "*Our English teacher gave us too much online learning assignments every week, ... These work occupied extra time and made me overwhelmed and frustrated*".

B. Perceptions of the Instructor Dimension

Students' perceptions of instructor practices in blended learning are presented in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE INSTRUCTOR DIMENSION

Survey questions	N	Mean	SD
14. In my English class, teacher uses technology to provide feedback on our work.	230	4.20	.740
15. In my English class, teacher uses multiple assessment methods to evaluate our learning.	230	4.30	.627

As shown in Table 3, students appreciated teachers' use of technology for feedback ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.740$) and favored diverse assessment methods ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.627$). Interview data also confirmed that they believed teachers provided immediate feedback on their classroom activities and used the LMS to provide prompt feedback for students online learning. However, due to the asynchronous and flexible nature of blended learning, it could be challenging for teachers to offer prompt feedback on the LMS, though teachers managed hard to assist students with their learning, as one student said, "*The LMS has the function of providing automatic revisions. But, when I text my teacher on the LMS, it usually takes a week or two to get responses from my teacher. I know teachers are always too busy to provide instant feedback on the LMS*".

Moreover, most students valued multiple assessment methods, which motivated them to engage in both online and offline learning. However, some questioned the fairness of relying solely on LMS logs for online assessment. As one student pointed out, "*Our online learning performances were mainly assessed based on the online learning logs on*

learning system, such as how much time we spent on watching videos, etc. But some of my classmates just let the video play without learning...So, I think teachers should design various forms of online learning tasks rather than merely video watching, to make students' online learning assessment becomes more systematic and fairer”.

Overall, students appreciated multiple assessment methods and timely feedback and emphasized the importance of effective management of blended learning by the teachers.

C. Perceptions of the Course Dimension

Students highly perceived the flexibility of blended learning and the abundance of online learning resources, as the results presented in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE COURSE DIMENSION

Survey questions	N	Mean	S. D
6. Online learning gives me more flexibility because I can control the pace of my learning.	230	3.73	1.004
7. My teacher provides us with a lot of learning resources, which helps me become more active and productive in the learning.	230	3.66	.944

As shown in Table 4, students acknowledged that online learning offered flexibility ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.004$) and access to abundant learning materials ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.944$). Interview data also highlighted that flexibility allowed better time and place management. Moreover, blended learning was also valued for its ability to provide a wide range of supplementary learning resources beyond the confines of textbooks and classroom instruction. For instance, students mentioned integrating SPOCs in courses provided them with a better way to gain knowledge from multiple sources, such as videos, articles, and web links. One student remarked on this point that “*The advantage of blended learning is the richness of materials available on the platform...These materials do broaden our knowledge about western culture, such as American election. I think they are the perfect complement for the textbook content*”.

However, one student in the interview pointed out that, although online learning allowed students to carry out learning according to their own time and pace, it was challenging for him to follow his time schedule. This implies that students with weak time-management ability struggled to maintain consistent learning habits, questioning the effectiveness of online learning for less self-disciplined learners.

D. Perceptions of the Technology Dimension

Table 5 presents students' perceptions of the technology aspect of blended learning.

TABLE 5
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TECHNOLOGY DIMENSION

Survey questions	N	Mean	S. D
11. I have sufficient opportunities to interact with my peers and teacher during both online and face-to-face components of the course.	230	4.57	.504
12. Teacher uses LMS to promote my collaboration in learning.	230	4.00	.779
13. Teacher uses LMS to encourage my autonomous learning.	230	4.09	.805

As shown in Table 5, students reported that learning system provided them with more opportunities for interactions ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.504$). They also noted that the LMS supported both autonomous ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.805$) and collaborative learning ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.779$).

College students were born in the information era; therefore, most students reported high level of digital proficiency, especially their competence in using LMS and locating learning resources. As one student remarked, “*I think I'm competent enough. I know how to use basic tools like discussion boards, online quizzes, and video lectures. I've also got better at finding additional resources online, like English podcasts and articles, to supplement my learning.*” Yet, one respondent, coming from under-resourced backgrounds showed moderate technological competence, facing difficulties keeping up with her classmates in using technology in the blended learning.

Students also perceived blended learning offered more chances for interaction among students and teachers. The LMS provides options for connecting and interacting with their peers and teachers through discussion forums. They were even more active in sharing opinions on the online forums than in the classroom discussions, as one student noted, “*We prefer to share our ideas behind the screen rather than in class...Maybe because Chinese people have the tradition of being introverted. Another reason for the silence in classroom is the poor oral English for most Chinese students*”.

In relation to technology accessibility, while the LMS facilitated flexibility and resource access, some students admitted to misusing the system — e.g., skipping videos — and noted unequal participation in group tasks. Additionally, high mobile internet fees and poor campus connectivity were common complaints. One student remarked, “*Every week, having to finish the tasks on the LMS, I have mobile phone apps which are accessible whenever, wherever. It's convenient but the problem is that internet on campus does not always work well. During some peak hours, the internet speed is rather slow, and I must wait for some time*”.

E. Perceptions of the Design Dimension

Students' perceptions of the blended learning design are shown in Table 6 below.

TABLE 6
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE DESIGN DIMENSION

Survey questions	N	Mean	SD
8. In my English class, my teacher used the flipped classroom learning methods. I learn at my own pace by completing online learning assignments, and during the face-to-face time onsite, the teacher answers questions and fosters discussion.	230	3.35	.894
9. In my English class, I meet face-to-face with the teacher on a regular basis and complete my coursework via computer from remote locations.	230	4.19	.954
10. In my English class, teacher uses SPOC-based learning model.	230	4.06	.899

Table 6 reveals that blended learning as the combination of regular face-to-face learning and flexible online learning was also agreed on by most students ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.954$), and the SPOC-based learning model was perceived very positively as a model adopted by their English language teacher ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.899$).

Findings from the interviews evidenced that most students recognized the implementations of SPOC platforms, such as *Superstar Learning System*, *U Campus Learning System*, and *WeLearn System* in supplementing classroom instruction. Learning materials and resources were provided on these learning systems for students autonomous learning based on their teachers' schedules, while students attended classroom learning at a regular time. One student reported, "In my English course, we used the *Superstar Learning System* for facilitating our English learning...The learning system also provided greater opportunities for interaction between students and teachers".

Students generally appreciated the balance of online and offline learning tailored by their teachers. However, lower-level language proficiency students experienced their teachers using offline-dominant blended learning approach, in which teaching materials were administered in the classroom and online learning served as the supporting role. In contrast, higher-level language proficiency students expected more time on flexible learning, with the classroom learning for discussions, and student presentations. Nevertheless, they commented that while the model promoted deeper engagement in learning, it is also challenging, and it required significant self-discipline and time outside of class.

V. DISCUSSION

This study provides important insights into how Chinese EFL students perceive blended learning in a local college context. Consistent with prior research (Osman et al., 2017; Pregoner & Baguio, 2024; Rashid et al., 2021), students expressed strong willingness and generally positive attitudes toward blended learning. They particularly valued the flexibility and abundance of online resources. These affordances enabled students to learn at their own pace and broaden their exposure to language input, thereby enhancing motivation and language outcomes (Ashraf et al., 2022; Banditvilai, 2016; Wong & Hwang, 2020).

Despite these perceived benefits, students also reported significant challenges in blended learning. While they thought they were competent in using the LMS, their understanding of the underlying pedagogical principle of blended learning remained limited. This lack of theoretical and strategic knowledge, combined with extra online workload, weak self-regulation, and technical issues undermined their overall learning experience of blended learning. Such findings align with earlier studies highlighting similar constraints in blended learning environments in under-resourced Chinese EFL classroom context (Wu & Luo, 2022; Guo et al., 2020; Wang, 2021).

Furthermore, students emphasized the importance of timely feedback and diverse assessment methods adopted by teachers. They pointed out that while the LMS facilitated prompt feedback in online learning, they still preferred more detailed and constructive input from teachers. This highlights a key challenge for teachers to balance between timeliness and quality of feedback (Wu & Luo, 2022; Sun & Qiu, 2017) when blending in online learning. Moreover, students' concerns about fairness in online assessment, particularly the over-reliance on LMS logs, underscores the need for more systematic and varied learning assessment strategies.

Another key finding relates to increased interaction. Students valued the increased opportunities for collaboration and communication with peers and teachers afforded by blended learning, which fostered a sense of community and engagement (Wang et al., 2024; Shoukat et al., 2024). However, the problems concerning misuse of the system reported by students, such as skipping videos on the LMS, unequal participation in group tasks, and being more interactive online but more reticent in classroom activities, highlight the importance of students' training and balancing online and face-to-face modalities to ensure meaningful engagement.

Finally, regarding instructional design, *the station rotation model* was more commonly adopted in language teaching in the local college, where students regularly met teachers in the classroom and completed online coursework on a small private online course (SPOC). This SPOC-based rotation model has also been used in some prominent universities in China (Wang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2017). While this model provided a structured balance between online and offline learning, students' preferences varied according to their language proficiency levels. Less proficient learners preferred

more teacher-led, offline-dominant approaches, while higher-level students favored flipped classroom models that encouraged autonomy and deeper engagement. These findings underscore the need for differentiated blended learning designs that align with students' proficiency, motivation, and self-regulation capacities.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Blended learning has become a growing focus in EFL education, yet few studies have examined students' perceptions particularly in local Chinese colleges. This study highlighted three main insights into students' views on blended learning: (1) students expressed positive attitudes and practical readiness, demonstrating greater understanding of technical aspects than of underlying pedagogical principles; (2) they valued the flexibility, abundant resources, interaction, and diverse assessment afforded by blended learning; and (3) they also faced challenges, including heavy workload, weak self-regulation, and technical barriers.

The study offers implications for multiple stakeholders. It suggests that *EFL teachers* should provide training, beginning with explicit elements about blended learning and moving toward a fuller understanding of pedagogical principles. Teachers should also develop robust supervision mechanisms, ensure regular, timely, and meaningful feedback, and employ multiple assessments to monitor learners' progress in both online and offline learning. *Students*, placed at the center of the learning process, are expected to be more active and self-directed participants, developing a strong sense of self-discipline and effective time-management skills. *Institutions*, particularly in under-resourced contexts, have a responsibility to invest in essential infrastructure, such as high-speed internet, functional learning management systems, and well-equipped computer labs or digital learning spaces, as well as to provide training and support programs for both teachers and students to facilitate blended learning adoption.

While the study provides valuable insights, its limitations should also be acknowledged. First, as the findings are based on data from a single local college, they cannot be generalized to all EFL contexts in China, though they may be transferable to other institutions with similar characteristics. Furthermore, as perceptions are dynamic and shaped by experience (Démuth, 2013), longitudinal studies are needed to explore how students' attitudes toward blended learning evolve over time. For future studies, they could compare different types of institutions to better understand how contextual factors influence blended learning in practice. Additionally, adopting experimental designs could help examine the interplay of pedagogy, institutional support, and learner factors. Such inquiries will be critical to advancing theory and practice and to realizing the transformative potential of blended learning in Chinese EFL education and beyond.

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