Blended Learning as Enacted Policy: Digital Inequality and IELTS Preparation in a Rural EFL Context

Thi-Tuyet Tran[1], Thi-Phuong-Lien Tuong[2]

[1] Hanoi University of Business and Technology, Viet Nam

[2] Hanoi University of Culture, Viet Nam

Correspondence: Thi-Phuong-Lien Tuong, Hanoi University of Culture, Viet Nam.

Received: December 30, 2025 Accepted: March 12, 2026 Online Published: June 17, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n5p447 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n5p447

Abstract

Blended learning (BL), highly recommended for its flexibility, scalability, and cost-effectiveness, remains underdocumented, particularly in rural settings where digital inequality persists, especially for high-stakes learning such as IELTS preparation. Based on Policy Enactment Theory and digital capital, this qualitative study aims to explore how BL for IELTS orientation is interpreted, translated, and enacted in a rural EFL setting in Vietnam. Data collection was conducted from November 2024 to March 2025, including semi-structured interviews of 15 school leaders/administrators, 15 teachers, 30 students, and 30 parents, along with observation, documentary, and questionnaire evidence. The study reveals that BL was not enacted as a uniform pedagogical model. Administrators framed it as modernization and efficiency; teachers experienced it as compensatory pedagogical labor; parents mediated it unevenly at home; and students encountered it through differentiated forms of participation shaped by their access conditions. Material, social, and digital inequalities did not merely constrain implementation; they structured enactment and produced uneven participation, including what this study conceptualizes as silent exclusion. The study contributes to blended learning and EFL research by reframing BL as an enacted policy process and by demonstrating how digital capital mediates access, participation, and opportunity in rural, test-oriented language education.

Keywords: blended learning; policy enactment; digital inequality; digital capital; IELTS preparation; rural EFL contexts

1. Introduction

Blended learning (BL), which integrates offline and online teaching, is also gaining widespread interest in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. It is often highlighted as a flexible and cost-effective approach to expanding access to high-quality language learning, especially where offline learning is constrained by classroom capacity (Graham, 2013; Tran & Chau, 2024). In some educational systems, there is a view that blended learning offers possible solutions to challenges related to infrastructure, personnel, and geographical distance, especially in marginalized environments (Selwyn, 2016).

In test-driven settings such as IELTS preparation, the use of blended learning has been further advanced by the growing need for global recognition of language credentials. When considered within the context of academic or employment mobility and immigration, the test has become a high-stakes filter, and access to quality learning options has become a serious concern within the group (Tran & Chau, 2024). Thus, the use of blended learning has often been presented as a method that can provide reach and value through more effective, efficient delivery of learning aligned with IELTS preparation.

Despite this interest, research on blended learning in EFL is generally limited to instructional design, learner perceptions, and learning outcomes, often assuming conditions typical of urban or well-resourced institutions. Reviews of blended learning research indicate that access, infrastructural issues, and teacher preparedness are framed only as implementation barriers to be overcome, rather than as enduring contextual conditions that enshape educational processes and participation. Only a few studies explicitly situate their investigations within rural contexts; these tend to frame rural constraints as temporary barriers to successful practice rather than as structural features of learning environments.

This tendency risks overlooking how blended learning unfolds in practice amid persistent conditions of digital inequality. Research on digital inequality has demonstrated that disparities in access, skills, and usage are systematically patterned along socio-economic and geographic lines and are closely linked to unequal educational participation (Selwyn, 2016; van Dijk, 2017). More recent work conceptualizes these disparities in terms of digital capital, emphasizing the cumulative role of material resources, competencies, and social support in shaping individuals' capacity to benefit from digital learning environments (Ragnedda, 2018; Hanna et al., 2025). However, insights have rarely been integrated into analyses of blended learning enactment in test-oriented EFL contexts.

In addressing this research gap, the current study employs Policy Enactment Theory as an analytical framework. Rather than treating blended learning as a pedagogical model enacted uniformly, PET views policy as actively interpreted, translated, and enacted by actors

within specific material, institutional, and cultural contexts (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Seen this way, blended learning for IELTS preparation can be framed as a policy process whose meanings and practices are generated through everyday enactment rather than being preordained by instructional design.

With this background, the current study investigates the implementation of blended learning for IELTS orientation in a rural EFL setting and analyzes the effects of digital inequality on its implementation. The following research questions are investigated in this research:

RQ1. How is blended learning for IELTS orientation enacted by different institutional actors in a rural EFL context?

RQ2. How do material, social, and digital inequalities mediate this enactment process?

RQ3. What forms of inclusion and exclusion emerge from the interaction between policy enactment and digital capital?

By foregrounding enactment and inequality, the study contributes to research on blended learning and language education by extending PET to test-oriented EFL contexts and challenging prevailing assumptions that technological innovation alone can address structural educational disparities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Blended Learning in EFL and Test-Oriented Programs

Blended learning (BL) is generally conceptualized as an educational delivery method that combines face-to-face learning with online components, thereby providing greater flexibility, autonomy, and access to diverse learning resources (Graham, 2013). In EFL learning, the use of BL has generally been associated with high levels of learner engagement and autonomy, as well as opportunities for authentic language immersion through technology (Kern, 2006; Tran & Chau, 2024). Furthermore, meta-analytical research has found BL to be more effective than either face-to-face or completely online learning when appropriately implemented and supported (Means et al., 2013).

In test-oriented English learning courses, including those focused on test preparation such as IELTS, the implementation of BL is considered an optimal approach for integrating skills training, assessment, and feedback (Chen et al., 2021). Technology supports the implementation of test material repetition, automated feedback, and learner progress tracking, which are highly preferred in high-stakes testing environments (Tran & Chau, 2024). As such, the adoption of BL is increasingly considered a strategic approach to address both instructional and infrastructural challenges in preparing for test-taking courses such as IELTS.

Notwithstanding, existing research on BL in the context of EFL and test prep remains remarkably teacher-practice-focused. This involves design and implementation processes in education, geared toward learning outcomes or technology adoption studies (Chen et al., 2021; Pawlak & Kruk, 2022). While these contributions provide an informed understanding of teaching and learning processes, issues related to governance, policy axiology, or structural inequality typically rank low on the list of priorities or fall outside its scope. This results in an unsustainable theoretical lacuna regarding the intersections of adoption processes and conditioning factors, including socio-economic realities, especially in rural areas.

2.2 Rurality, Access, and Educational Inequality

Research into rural education also continues to show that rurality is not just a spatial construct but a structural one, marked by a lack of infrastructure, institutional capacity, and an inequitable distribution of educational resources. For instance, in language education, rural learners are often at a disadvantage in finding qualified teachers, having limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom, and having restricted access to supplementary learning materials (Tran, 2023; Tran & Chau, 2024).

In the context of digital education, rurality is closely linked to access to technology. Studies across disparate contexts demonstrate that rural schools and communities often face shaky internet connectivity, a shortage of digital devices, and insufficient technical support-all factors that collectively hinder the realization of technology-enhanced learning models in schools (Selwyn, 2016; Tran & Chau, 2024). These constraints extend beyond physical infrastructure to include parental mediation, home learning environments, and community-level digital practices that shape learners' capacity to engage meaningfully with online BL components.

Despite the emergence of considerable literature on rural education and technology-enhanced learning, existing scholarly BL discourse continues to be mapped onto assumptions that are largely applicable to urban settings and better-equipped institutions. There has been considerable focus in the existing literature on BL and its synthesis, particularly regarding instructional design, engagement, and adoption factors, including teacher training, technology readiness, and platform usability (Asrifan et al., 2020; Tran, 2023; Tran & Chau, 2024). Within this discourse, infrastructure, connectivity, and institutional factors are considered as base conditions rather than as variables of import.

In those instances where the rural environment is specifically taken into consideration, issues of the constraints caused by the lack of access to the internet, devices, and the home environment are commonly viewed as challenges that are only short-term in nature and require the assistance of better training or infrastructure for the effective implementation of the program (Tran, 2023; Tran & Chau, 2024). This perspective would place the challenges faced by the rural environment as something that acts as only a short-term inhibitor in the successful implementation of the program, but does not see the disadvantage faced by the environment as an enduring factor in the way that the program could be best conducted in the environment (Wang & Wang, 2024).

Much as this 'barriers' paradigm tends to neglect the social reproduction function of digital inequity, it has also been found again and again that inequities related to access, literacy, and use are neither neutral nor ephemeral, but instead systematically structured by social

and geographic factors (Selwyn, 2016; Tran & Sukying, 2025). In a nonurban environment, such inequities are not confined to schools; they also affect the learner's capacity to meaningfully engage with technology-based education as a regular part of daily life. Recent literature on technology-based learning has found that rurality and its relationship with platform use and technology-based learning practices create 'stratification' regardless of technology accessibility (Hanna et al., 2025). Taken together, these results suggest that the dominant view of rural issues within blended learning research, as deficiencies to be remedied through effective implementation, does not adequately capture how rural issues, together with issues of digital inequality, serve as the structuring conditions for the educational process. It is particularly significant in the context of high-stakes, test-driven courses such as IELTS preparation programs, because disparities in the uptake of blended learning led to immediate, credentialized differences in educational mobility. Closing the gap calls for approaching the phenomenon through the lens of enactments, coupled with an emphasis on shaping, facilitating, and differential realization within the rural context. This framing risks overlooking how initiatives on BL, particularly those linked to high-stakes credentials, may reproduce or even intensify existing inequalities if enacted without sensitivity to rural constraints.

2.3 Digital Inequality and Digital Capital

Researchers have increasingly relied on the lens of digital inequality to study unequal educational engagement with technology-mediated learning environments. Although the original concepts of the digital divide were largely limited to unequal access to hardware and the internet, emerging research has shown that the digital divide is complex and multifaceted, encompassing differences in skills, use, and outcomes (Van Dijk, 2017). Van Dijk's (2017) model typologizes digital inequality as an ongoing process involving access, skills, and use, and emphasizes that being disconnected is not the same as being connected. This theory was developed into the idea that digital inequality is based on social reproduction, which means the existing socio-economic divide is reshuffled, not reduced, with the use of digital technology, and that this can lead to the idea that digital educational projects can favor students who already have the cultural, social, and economic capitals needed to realize the potential offered by technology, as suggested by Selwyn (2016). Recently, Ragnedda (2018) proposed the notion of "digital capital," an extension of Bourdieu's theoretical framework of capital to the digital environment. Digital capital refers to the set of resources, both material and immaterial, encompassing the cultural and social capital that provides users with access to digital technologies and their benefits (Bui et al., 2022; Ragnedda, 2018). Differences in digital capital are not the result of chance but are institutionalized within systems of inequality.

When considered in the context of BL in test-driven EFL education, the implications of these findings reveal the following: digital inequality also operates not merely as an enabling deficit, but also as a constitutive condition, determining who can participate in the process of BL, and who is marginalized from it (Ragnedda, 2018; Selwyn, 2016). Although it offers considerable explanatory power, digital inequality has not, as a rule, become a component of the study of BL as a policy process. Though there is a great deal of research on blended learning, test preparation, and ESL, blended learning as a policy process has, until now, been inadequately explored, and the role of digital inequities as a mediating variable has been unexamined, especially in rural areas and in high-stakes testing.

2.4 Policy Enactment Theory

A useful lens for considering the above gap is PET, which focuses attention away from the implementation process and toward the daily practices through which policies are interpreted, translated, and enacted (Ball et al., 2012). For example, policies are viewed not as a set of words on paper but as continually constructed by social actors operating within certain material, cultural, or institutional constraints. Ball et al.(2012) describe the process of policy enactment as consisting of three closely interconnected activities: "interpretation, wherein actors seek to make sense of texts, discourses, and other symbolic representations of policy"; "translation, whereby texts, discourses, and other symbolic representations of policy are made locally doable"; and "enactment, which denotes the situated, in situ, and frequently improvisational acts through which the performed reality of the policy takes form." Importantly, all of these processes are mediated by actors' positionalities and their ability to command resources. As a research framework in education, PET emphasizes the non-dominated agency of various actors within specific policy realities. That is, while focusing on policymakers and dominant actors within institutions, PET emphasizes the agency of administrators, teachers, learners, and parents as important actors in the realization of policies (Ball et al., 2012). A crucial component of this approach is the sensitivity to the material and contextual conditions. Policy implementation is always facilitated by infrastructural and technological elements, professional culture and institutional histories, and expectations and norms (Ball et al., 2012). Later literature has established that these conditions not only restrict the process but also shape it, resulting in unequal institutional realities of realization and implementation (Ball et al., 2012; Bizami, 2023). Within this theoretical perspective, parents and learners are identified as important yet complex actors in the domain of educational policy, especially when learning is no longer the exclusive domain of formal institutions and has permeated domestic and social spaces (Ball et al., 2012; Bizami, 2023). The notion of the differentiated enactment of educational policies is reinforced by this theoretically constructed perspective of PET and applies to the domain of IELTS-oriented educational policies, wherein the realization of these policies is influenced by assessment culture, learning and educational philosophies, and ideologies of language ability.

2.5 Conceptual Framework of the Study

While PET offers a nuanced account of policy processes, it has been less explicit about the role of digital inequality in shaping enactment in technology-mediated educational reforms. This study addresses this limitation by integrating digital inequality, and specifically digital capital, into the enactment framework. From this integrated perspective, digital capital functions as a mediating resource that conditions actors' capacity to interpret, translate, and enact BL policies. Actors with higher levels of digital capital, such as access to stable internet,

familiarity with digital platforms, and supportive home environments, are better positioned to enact BL as envisioned by policy designers. Conversely, actors with limited digital capital may engage in partial, constrained, or symbolic enactments, or may be effectively excluded from meaningful participation altogether. In rural IELTS-oriented BL programs, these dynamics are particularly pronounced. Teachers may reinterpret BL as additional workload rather than a pedagogical enhancement; parents may struggle to serve as effective mediators due to limited digital literacy; and students may experience fragmented participation depending on their access to devices and supportive learning environments. By foregrounding digital inequality within PET, the study conceptualizes BL enactment as inherently uneven and stratified, rather than as a neutral or uniformly accessible innovation.

Based on PET and theories of digital inequality, this research proposes a conceptual framework that situates blended learning in IELTS orientation as a policy process enacted within the context of rural constraints and digital inequality. Figure 1 is the conceptual framework for the study. Based on the PET, the BL process for the IELTS orientation program is considered an enactment by actors within the institutions, rather than a fixed learning approach. The processes are interpreted and translated into the learning process depending on the context, specifically the digital capital, infrastructure, and rurality.

Within this paradigm, BL is conceptualized less as a rigid educational paradigm and more as a process whose implementation is dynamically driven by engagement with material and social contexts. Digital capital and rurality exist within the paradigm as forces whose effects are felt in the realization and implementation of BL, offering differential experiences. The paradigm assumes that the emphasis on tests in BL enactment can precipitate differential experiences in the educational setting.

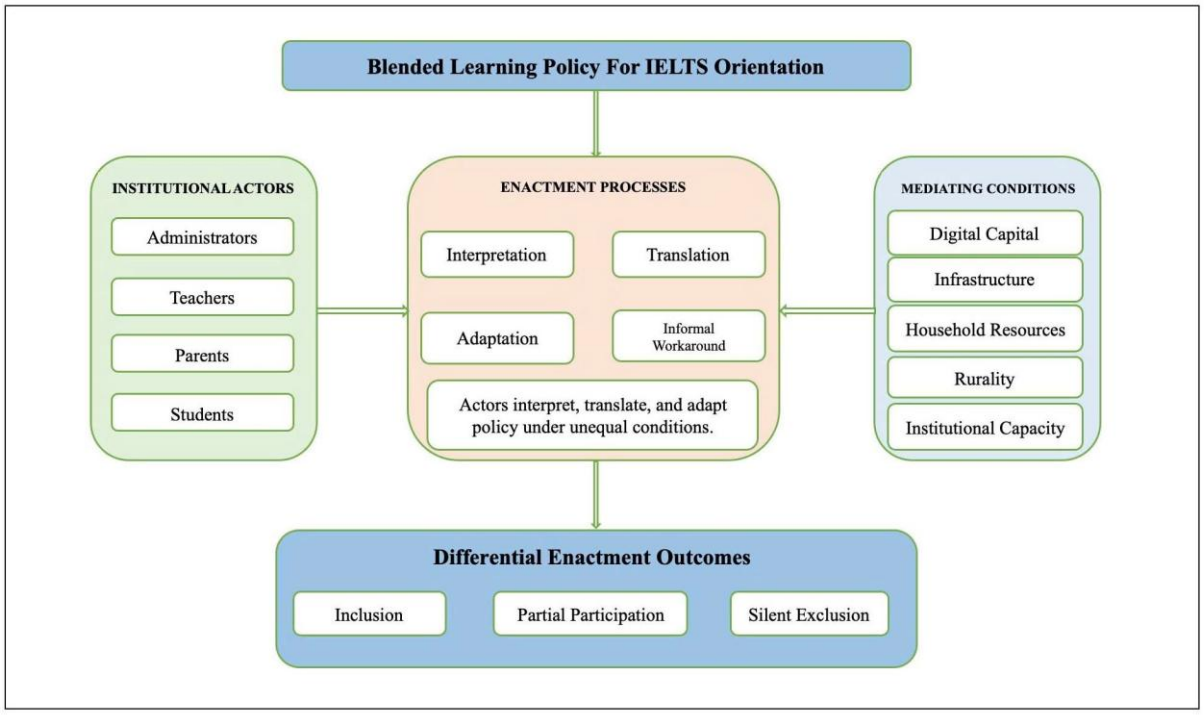

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of blended learning enactment in a rural EFL context

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine how blended learning (BL) policies for IELTS orientation were enacted in a rural EFL context amid digital inequality. A qualitative approach was particularly suited to the study's theoretical orientation, as PET emphasizes meaning-making, interpretation, and situated practices rather than linear implementation or outcome measurement (Ball et al., 2012). Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of blended learning as a pedagogical intervention, the study sought to understand how BL is interpreted, negotiated, and enacted by different institutional actors, and how these enactments are shaped by material, social, and digital conditions.

The case study design enables an in-depth, context-sensitive analysis (Tran & Nguyen, 2024) of BL enactment within a bounded institutional setting in which IELTS serves as a high-stakes credential. This approach is appropriate for capturing the complexity of enactment processes in rural contexts, where educational practices are embedded in local infrastructures, institutional cultures, and community-level inequalities. By focusing on a single, information-rich case, the study aims to generate analytically transferable insights rather than statistically generalizable findings.

3.2 Research Context

The research was conducted in a rural English-language educational setting in Vietnam. In this context, the implementation of the BL was part of an IELTS-oriented learning program. IELTS, in this case, was a vital gateway to educational mobility in selective upper-secondary programs and to higher learning opportunities accessible to learners. The need to implement BL in this research was informed by the institution's efforts to revitalize teaching and ensure educational accessibility, particularly in remote areas with teacher shortages.

Nevertheless, this aspiration coexisted with the diverse digital infrastructure in the research setting, including unreliable internet access, limited use of personal digital devices, and limited technical support. Spillover learning was also occurring between the educational environment and learners' residences, were parental correction, home resources, or the surrounding digital environment shaped learning. These aspects ensure that the setting was appropriately rich for the study of the BL policy application within the rural constraints and differential digital capital.

3.3 Participants and Data Sources

Guided by Policy Enactment Theory (PET), this study conceptualized participants not merely as respondents but as social actors involved in the interpretation, translation, and enactment of blended learning in a rural EFL context. Because the study was conducted across multiple phases, the participant profile included both the broader qualitative sample and the actors directly involved in implementing and mediating the IELTS-oriented blended learning initiative.

A convenience sampling design was employed to select participants who were readily available and relevant to the research. The selection criteria also slightly varied among the different actor groups but generally required participants to have direct experience of, responsibility for, or involvement in the design, delivery, mediation, or uptake of the blended learning program. The school leaders were selected because they had some involvement in planning, coordinating, or decision-making within their institutions. The local teachers were selected because they had direct involvement in the blended learning instruction. The parents were selected because they mediated students' access to learning and their uptake of learning at home. The students were selected based on their direct experience with blended learning in the IELTS-oriented initiative.

The qualitative strand involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 15 school leaders/administrators, 15 local teachers, 30 students, and 30 parents. These groups enabled the research to investigate the enactment at the institutional, pedagogical, household, and learner levels, rather than from the perspective of a single stakeholder. Data were collected from November 2024 to March 2025 across multiple phases of qualitative inquiry, using semi-structured interviews, observations, documentary analysis, and supporting questionnaires. The inclusion of multiple actor groups and data sources strengthened the study's analytical depth by enabling comparisons across different positions within the enactment process. It also enabled the findings to speak not only to the focal setting but also more broadly to issues of distance learning in comparable rural and under-resourced educational contexts.

Table 1 outlines the institutional actors who participated in implementing blended learning in the IELTS orientation and the sources used to examine the implementation process at different levels. Instead of considering the research participants as respondents, the table presents them as actors who participated in shaping the blending process, as interpreted and enacted in rural settings.

Table 1. Research participants and data sources

Actor group	Role in policy enactment	Data sources
Administrators	Policy interpretation & institutional translation	Interviews, documents
Teachers	Pedagogical enactment & adaptation	Interviews, FGDs, observations
Parents	Home-based mediation of enactment	Interviews, FGDs, communication logs
Students	Lived enactment & participation	Interviews, FGDs, observations

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach that was both data-driven and theoretically informed. As is typical of qualitative research, data analysis was not linear but iterative. That is, interview data, observational notes, and documentary materials were repeatedly analyzed to develop an initial familiarity with the dataset and identify recurring patterns across actor groups. For the first stage of data analysis, initial coding was conducted inductively to capture participants' own understandings of blended learning, particularly regarding access, participation, responsibility, support, adaptation, etc. Careful attention was given to repeated expressions, tensions, or stories of disruption/adaptation, which provided insights into how blended learning was being made workable in constrained conditions. For the second stage of data analysis, initial codes were examined in relation to broader conceptual themes using sensitizing concepts from PET and digital inequality. Concepts such as policy interpretation, translation, enactment, actor positioning, access, digital skills, and mediation were used to examine how institutional expectations were recontextualized in practice and how unequal access to resources shaped actors' capacity to enact the blended learning model. In the final stage, these categories were refined into analytically distinct themes through constant comparison across interviews, observations, and documentary sources. Themes were generated not only on the basis of recurrence across the dataset but also on the basis of their explanatory relevance to the research questions and the study's conceptual framework.

The coding process was conducted by the researcher through repeated engagement with the full dataset. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, observations, documentary materials, and questionnaire evidence, as well as through comparison across actor groups and phases of data collection. Reflexive attention was maintained throughout the analytic process to ensure that interpretations remained closely grounded in the empirical material while being informed by the conceptual lenses of PET and digital

inequality. The coding framework used in this study is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Coding framework content

Analytical dimension	Sensitizing concepts	Illustrative focus
Policy interpretation	Modernization, efficiency, risk	How actors define and value blended learning
Translation and enactment	Adaptation, improvisation, coordination	How blended learning is made workable in practice
Digital capital	Access, skills, mediation	Who can participate effectively in enactment
Enactment outcomes	Inclusion, partial participation, exclusion	Consequences of uneven enactment conditions

3.6 Researcher Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

In consideration of this being a qualitatively and contextually driven piece of research, reflexivity on the part of the researcher was considered key to this process. The researcher's background and knowledge of English language education and blended learning projects were important, but also necessitated reflexivity regarding possible assumptions. Reflexive journaling was undertaken to reflect on the implications of the researcher's positionality.

Ethical clearance was obtained before data collection. All participants were fully informed of the aims and processes of the research and volunteered to participate. Pseudonyms were used for participants and institutions to protect confidentiality, especially in rural settings where anonymity is difficult to maintain. All data is stored and can be accessed only by the research team members.

4. Findings

This section presents the study's findings through the lens of policy enactment, focusing on how blended learning (BL) for IELTS orientation was interpreted, translated, and enacted by various institutional actors in a rural EFL context. Rather than treating stakeholders' accounts as isolated perceptions, the analysis foregrounds patterns of enactment shaped by unequal material conditions, differential digital capital, and the high-stakes nature of IELTS preparation. Across data sources, four interrelated enactment patterns emerged.

To move beyond descriptive accounts of stakeholder perceptions, Table 3 synthesizes the qualitative findings into analytically derived patterns of policy enactment across institutional actors. The table highlights how administrators, teachers, parents, and students enacted blended learning in distinct yet interrelated ways, shaped by their positionalities, responsibilities, and access to material and digital resources.

Table 3. Patterns of blended learning enactment across actors

Actor	Dominant enactment pattern	Enactment constraints
Administrators	Strategic modernization	Limited awareness of ground conditions
Teachers	Improvised pedagogical enactment	Workload, infrastructure
Parents	Uneven mediation	Digital literacy, resources
Students	Differential participation	Access, home support

4.1 Interpreting Blended Learning: Divergent Policy Meanings Across Actors

The first pattern of enactment concerned how BL was interpreted differently by actors positioned at different levels of the educational ecology. At the managerial level, administrators consistently framed BL as a marker of modernization and institutional efficiency. In interviews and planning documents, BL was presented as a strategic mechanism for widening access to IELTS preparation while reducing reliance on physical infrastructure and permanent teaching staff. As one administrator explained, BL was intended to "bring urban-quality IELTS instruction to rural students without expanding classrooms or staffing" (A-Int-01). This framing positioned BL primarily as a modernization strategy rather than as a context-sensitive practice requiring substantial on-the-ground adaptation.

Teachers' interpretations diverged sharply from the institutional framing of blended learning. While they acknowledged the pedagogical potential of integrating online and face-to-face instruction, they more often experienced BL as intensifying rather than reducing their work. As one teacher explained, "When the online system doesn't work, I still have to make sure the students understand the lesson, so I end up doing everything twice" (T-Int-03). A similar concern emerged in another teacher's interview, which emphasized the need to repeatedly adjust lesson delivery and to compensate for technological disruptions during implementation (T-Int-06). Taken together, these accounts suggest that teachers enacted BL less as a streamlined innovation than as a form of compensatory pedagogical labor requiring continuous adjustment. This interpretation was further supported by observation data, which documented repeated shifts from planned online tasks to improvised offline explanations when digital delivery became unstable.

Parents' interpretations were marked by uncertainty and ambivalence. Some associated BL with greater educational opportunity and closer oversight of learning, but others emphasized their limited digital literacy and lack of confidence in supporting online learning at home. As one parent stated, "I want to help, but I don't really understand the system, so when the internet is weak, I just tell my child to study from the book" (P-Int-02). A similar phenomenon was evident in the narrative of another parent's interview, which emphasized the necessity of restructuring family schedules and making the most of available resources to facilitate the child's involvement in the blended learning process (P-Int-05). The above testimonies reveal that parental mediation was conditioned not only by the motivation to facilitate the child's learning process but also by parental confidence in navigating the new digital setup and by the availability of resources within

the family. The parents were found to be cautious mediators rather than empowered participants in the process.

Students' interpretations were similarly differentiated by access conditions. Those with stable connectivity and individual devices tended to view BL as flexible and useful for repeated IELTS practice, whereas those with unstable internet or shared devices described it as fragmented and unreliable. One student explained, "Sometimes I miss the online part because I have to share the phone, so I wait for the teacher to explain again in class" (S-Int-07). A similar pattern appeared in another student's interview, which described continued reliance on adjusted participation and informal support under constrained access conditions (S-Int-08). These accounts suggest that BL was not interpreted uniformly even among learners; its meaning depended on whether students could actually access its digital dimension in a stable and continuous way. In this respect, enactment was already stratified at the level of interpretation.

Overall, these findings show that BL for IELTS orientation was enacted through actor-specific interpretations rather than through a single shared institutional understanding. Administrators interpreted BL as strategic modernization, teachers as pedagogical compensation, parents as uncertain mediation, and students as either flexible opportunity or unstable access, depending on their material conditions.

4.2 Material and Digital Conditions Shaping Enactment

The second pattern of enactment concerned the role of material and digital conditions in shaping what BL could become in practice. Across interviews and observations, unstable internet access, limited device availability, and classroom constraints did not merely obstruct implementation; they actively structured the form that enactment took.

Teachers repeatedly described having to redesign lessons in anticipation of disruption. One teacher explained, "Sometimes the online component just won't function. Then the internet connection goes down, and the only solution is to halt the online component and continue teaching the lesson offline. It isn't the way blended learning should take place, but it's the only means to ensure the lesson continues" (T-Int-04). This excerpt is analytically important because it shows that adaptation was not peripheral to BL enactment; it was central to its everyday operation. Observation data were consistent with this account, documenting interruptions, simplified online tasks, and frequent movement from planned digital activities to improvised offline teaching. Enactment was therefore shaped as much by infrastructural contingency as by pedagogical design.

At the household level, material inequality shaped enactment through uneven parental mediation. Some families were able to provide devices, connectivity, and quiet study space, thereby enabling more sustained participation. Others, however, were unable to provide consistent support because of limited digital competence, scarce household resources, or competing domestic demands. As one parent explained, "I want to help, but I don't really understand the system" (P-Int-02), directly linking technological difficulty to reduced support at home. A related pattern also emerged in another parent's interview, highlighting the need to reorganize household routines and manage limited resources to sustain the child's participation in blended learning (P-Int-05). When online participation became difficult, support often shifted to print- or book-based alternatives, which only partially sustained learning. BL thus extended beyond the classroom into already unequal domestic environments, where enactment depended heavily on household resources and capabilities.

These findings suggest that material and digital conditions did not operate as neutral background factors. Rather, they structured who could participate, how BL was enacted, and how consistently the model could be sustained. More broadly, the evidence indicates that enactment capacity in rural BL settings was mediated by an interaction of material access, digital competence, and social support.

4.3 Differential Enactment and Uneven Participation

The third pattern concerned differential student participation, shaped by unequal levels of digital capital. Students with stable home internet, individual devices, and supportive learning environments were better positioned to engage in both the online and offline dimensions of the program. The findings suggested that these students participated more consistently in online activities, made greater use of digital IELTS resources, and were better able to revisit asynchronous content for extended practice. Their enactment more closely approximated the institutional expectations embedded in the BL model.

By contrast, students with lower digital capital experienced a much more fragmented form of enactment. They often missed online sessions, relied on shared or borrowed devices, and participated inconsistently in tasks requiring sustained access to the platform. One student described this clearly: "I know there are online classes, but at times I am unable to attend because I share my only phone with my sister," and therefore had to "wait for the teacher to repeat in class" (S-Int-07). A similar pattern appeared in another student's interview, which described continued reliance on adjusted participation and informal support under constrained access conditions (S-Int-08). These accounts show that formal enrollment in the program did not guarantee full participation in its blended format. Instead, the enactment available to students depended on their ability to mobilize the digital and domestic resources required by the policy.

This pattern points to what the study conceptualizes as silent exclusion. Students remained officially included in the program and were not necessarily categorized as absent or disengaged. However, their access to the online dimension of learning was partial, unstable, and often institutionally invisible. Exclusion, in this sense, was not produced through formal denial of access but through the normalization of underparticipation within everyday implementation. Teachers were generally aware of these disparities, but their ability to compensate for them was constrained by workload, time pressure, and the need to sustain the formal structure of BL. Uneven participation was therefore not incidental to enactment; it was one of its emergent outcomes.

Table 4 illustrates how differences in digital capital shaped actors' capacity to enact BL. Rather than functioning as a simple binary divide, digital inequality produced graduated outcomes, ranging from relatively full participation to partial engagement and silent exclusion.

Table 4. Digital capital and differential enactment outcomes

Level of digital capital	Enactment capacity	Learning experience
High	Full enactment	Consistent participation
Medium	Partial enactment	Fragmented engagement
Low	Constrained enactment	Silent exclusion

Taken together, these findings answer the third research question by showing that the interaction between policy enactment and digital capital produced stratified forms of inclusion and exclusion. Learners were positioned differently within the same BL policy, not because the policy formally distinguished among them, but because their capacity to enact its digital demands varied substantially.

4.4 Negotiation, Adaptation, and Informal Workarounds

A further pattern of enactment concerned the negotiation and adaptation strategies that actors used to sustain BL in ways viable in these contexts. A key role here emerged for teachers, who used continuous improvisation to mediate between policy demands and local conditions. Evidence from interview and observation data indicated that teachers used offline activities alongside online activities, adapted the pace and deadlines of activities, and used instant messaging as a backchannel to mitigate platform instability and connectivity issues (T-Int-06; T-Obs-03). These were not specified in the original BL design but were local adaptations used to sustain instruction.

Parents also played a critical, though uneven, role in this adaptive process as learning extended into the domestic space. Interview data indicated that parental mediation was strongly shaped by digital literacy and household resources, producing adaptations that enabled partial enactment rather than full participation. As one parent explained, “I try to help, but I don’t really understand the online system. For instance, if internet access is slow, I just tell my child to study from the book instead” (P-Int-04). This account suggests that parental support often took the form of pragmatic substitution rather than direct engagement with the digital component, thereby reinforcing differentiated learning experiences across households.

A related pattern emerged in another parent’s interview, which highlighted the need to manage device sharing, reorganize household schedules, and draw on community-based internet access or local service points to sustain participation (P-Int-05). These accounts show that BL enactment extended beyond formal institutional provision into informal and relational spaces, where policy was sustained as much through social negotiation as through school-based design. Yet these adaptations were unevenly distributed and remained heavily dependent on actors’ social and digital capital. While informal workarounds helped some learners remain partially connected, they also reproduced inequality by favoring families with greater flexibility, stronger social networks, and better access to resources (S-Int-08; P-Int-05). BL enactment in this rural context was therefore not characterized by uniform implementation but by localized negotiations that produced stratified learning experiences. Informal workarounds functioned as compensatory mechanisms within the enactment process, mitigating disruption for some learners while normalizing inequality for others.

To synthesize these findings more clearly, Figure 2 presents an empirical model of the enactment of differentiated blended learning in the rural EFL context under study. In contrast to Figure 1, which introduced the conceptual framework guiding the analysis, Figure 2 shows how the findings refine that framework by illustrating the relationship among institutional framing, actor-specific enactment, mediating contextual conditions, and differentiated participation outcomes.

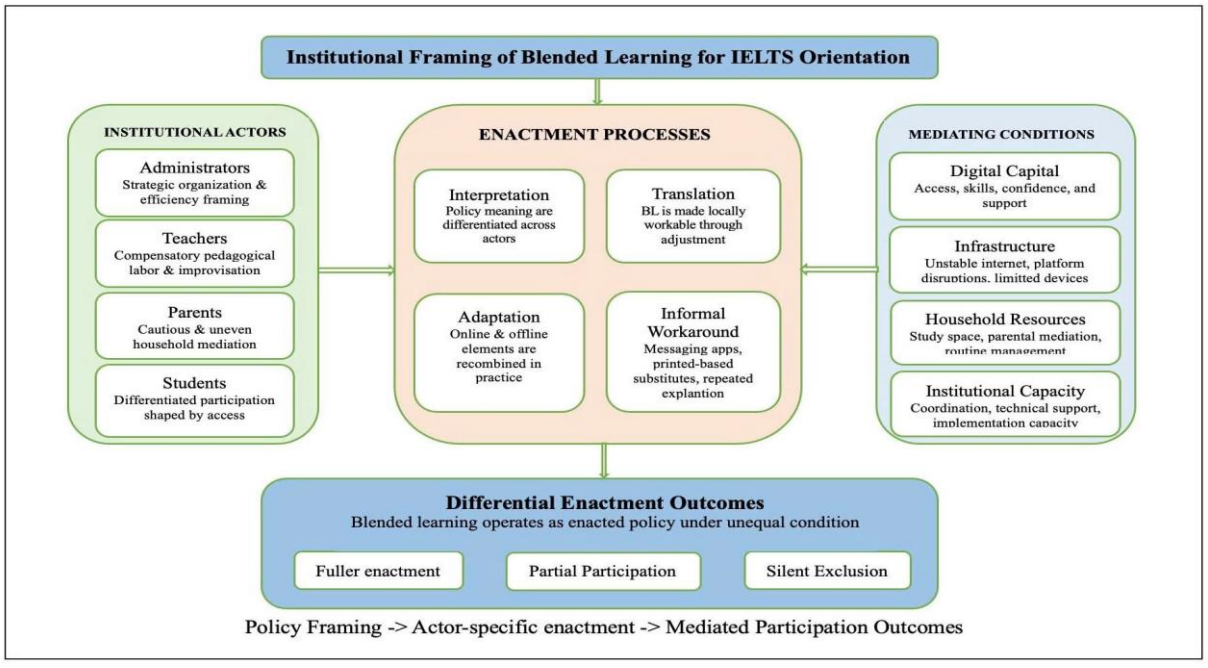

Figure 2. Empirical synthesis model of blended learning enactment

Overall, the findings across Sections 4.1- 4.4 show that BL for IELTS orientation was enacted through a differentiated ecology of actors, conditions, and practices. The policy did not move intact from design to implementation. Instead, it was interpreted, mediated, compensated for, and lived unevenly, with material, social, and digital inequalities shaping who could participate fully, who could participate only partially, and who became silently excluded within a formally inclusive model.

5. Discussion

This study examined how blended learning (BL) for IELTS orientation is enacted in a rural EFL context and how digital inequality mediates this enactment across institutional actors. Guided by Policy Enactment Theory (PET) and the concept of digital capital, the discussion reframes blended learning from a pedagogical intervention to a policy process whose meanings, practices, and equity consequences are produced through enactment under enduring rural constraints. In line with the conceptual framework (Figure 1), the findings show that variation in participation and learning experiences is better explained by enactment processes and mediating conditions than by instructional design alone.

5.1 Blended Learning As Enacted Policy In IELTS-Oriented Programs

Addressing RQ1, the findings show that blended learning for IELTS orientation was enacted differently across institutional actors rather than implemented as a uniform pedagogical model. Administrators framed BL primarily as modernization and efficiency; teachers experienced it as compensatory pedagogical labor; parents mediated it unevenly within household contexts; and students encountered it through differentiated forms of participation shaped by access conditions. This is in line with Policy Enactment Theory, which posits that policy meanings do not reside in policy documents but in their interpretation, translation, and enactment by actors with distinct positions in specific contexts (Ball et al., 2012). This study also resonates with previous educational technology policy studies, indicating that digital policy is often interpreted differently by policymakers, administrators, teachers, and users (Selwyn, 2016; Bizami et al., 2023).

This study is, however, unique in that most blended learning policy studies have examined BL in terms of instructional design, learner perceptions, technology adoption, or learning outcomes (Asrifan et al., 2020; Graham, 2013; Chen et al., 2021). Most studies on blended learning have viewed it as an educational model whose effectiveness depends on its quality or fidelity. By contrast, the current study shows that in a rural, IELTS-oriented setting, BL operated as a policy process distributed across institutional, pedagogical, and domestic domains. In this context, enactment was shaped not only by formal program design but also by actors' roles, responsibilities, and situated capacities to make the model workable in practice.

What the present study adds, therefore, is a more actor-sensitive account of BL in high-stakes EFL education. Rather than assuming that blended learning carries a stable pedagogical meaning across contexts, the study demonstrates that its meaning is socially differentiated and institutionally mediated. In this respect, the study extends previous BL research into the terrain of policy sociology by showing that the implementation of IELTS-oriented BL is better understood as an enacted policy than as a neutral instructional innovation.

5.2 Digital Inequality as a Structuring Condition of Enactment

Addressing RQ2, the findings indicate that material, social, and digital inequalities did not merely constrain blended learning from the outside; rather, they structured the form that enactment took in practice. The teacher's adaptation was influenced by infrastructural instability; the parents' mediation by resource availability and digital confidence; and the students' ability to participate by the availability of devices and home connectivity. This is consistent with general digital inequality studies indicating that access, skills, and usage are unevenly distributed and closely linked to educational participation (Selwyn, 2016; Van Dijk, 2017; Ragnedda, 2018). The study also resonates with the rural studies on technology-enhanced learning that have highlighted the impact of connectivity instability, device scarcity, and unequal technical support on learners' participation (Tran, 2023; Nuby et al., 2020).

At the same time, the present study goes beyond earlier work that has often treated such inequalities as implementation barriers to be overcome through better infrastructure, training, or platform support. While the barriers perspective remains useful, it tends to position inequality as a contextual obstacle external to pedagogy or policy. By contrast, the current findings suggest that inequality should be understood as a constitutive condition of enactment. In other words, digital inequality not only made it more difficult to implement BL; it also influenced who implemented it, how it was implemented, and in what ways. This is an important distinction because it shifts our focus from whether it is implemented to how it is implemented differently.

In this respect, the study extends both PET and digital inequality scholarship. PET has emphasized that policy enactment is shaped by institutional histories, material resources, and professional cultures (Ball et al., 2012), but it has been less explicit about the role of digital capital in mediating enactment capacity. Conversely, digital inequality research has shown how technological access and digital skills are stratified, but has less often examined these inequalities as part of a policy enactment process. By bringing these traditions into dialogue, the present study shows that enactment capacity itself is unevenly distributed and that this unevenness is central, not peripheral, to understanding blended learning in rural, test-oriented EFL settings.

5.3 Uneven Enactment, Participation, and Silent Exclusion

Addressing RQ3, the findings show that the interaction between policy enactment and digital capital produced a pattern of formal inclusion alongside substantive stratification. Although BL was institutionally framed as a means of widening access to IELTS preparation, its enactment generated uneven participation that often remained institutionally invisible. This finding aligns with critical scholarship suggesting that digital learning environments frequently reproduce inequality through differential participation rather than through explicit

exclusion (Bui et al., 2022; Selwyn, 2016). It is also consistent with rural digital learning research showing that formal enrolment and nominal access may conceal unequal opportunities to engage meaningfully with instruction (Nuby et al., 2020).

However, the present study extends this literature in two important ways. First, it situates uneven participation within a policy enactment framework, showing that exclusion is not merely an outcome of individual student disadvantage but of how BL is interpreted, translated, and sustained under unequal conditions. Second, it demonstrates that in an IELTS-oriented context, fragmented participation has particularly high stakes because access to preparation is tied to credential-bearing opportunities and future educational mobility. Existing IELTS research has focused largely on washback, learner strategies, and proficiency outcomes (i.e., Tran, 2023; Tran & Chau, 2024), but has paid far less attention to how access to preparation itself is stratified through the enactment of digitally mediated educational policy.

The concept of silent exclusion is especially important here. Students with limited digital capital remained officially included in the program, yet they enacted BL only partially, relying on offline substitutes, delayed participation, or repeated teacher explanation in place of sustained online engagement. What the present study adds is a more explicit account of how formal inclusion within blended learning may coexist with unequal access to the conditions necessary for meaningful participation. Silent exclusion, therefore, should not be understood as an incidental failure of implementation but as a patterned outcome produced at the intersection of policy design, infrastructural inequality, household mediation, and actor capacity. In this respect, the study broadens current understanding of participation by showing that BL should be conceptualized not as a binary of access versus non-access but as a continuum ranging from fuller enactment to partial participation and constrained inclusion.

5.4 Practical Implications

The implications of the current study's findings are of considerable significance for the various stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of BL in rural EFL contexts. The overall evidence provided in the current study suggests that BL should not be viewed as a universally applicable instructional innovation. Rather, the implementation of BL should be viewed as a context-specific policy process that is subject to unequal material, social, and digital conditions. This implication of the current study's findings is consistent with concerns raised in the context of past educational technology reform. Specifically, it was suggested that educational technology reform should be viewed as a technical approach to addressing structural issues in education (Selwyn, 2016). The current study extends this implication by showing that the unequal conditions of BL implementation in the rural IELTS context are particularly important, as they affect access not just to learning opportunities in general.

For policymakers, the study's implications are that the policy supporting BL should not be conceptualized solely in terms of the efficiency, modernization, and scaling-up narrative without considering implementation capacity. The study extends the existing body of research, which has indicated that digital policy and reform are conceptualized in terms of the flexibility and access narrative (Graham, 2013; Selwyn, 2016). However, this study contributes to the body of knowledge by highlighting the importance of policymakers recognizing that the expansion of access and the quality of implementation in the policy supporting digital language learning should be conceptualized beyond the enrollment-based narrative and take into consideration the reliability of the infrastructure in place, access to devices, and the mediating role of the household in the digital landscape. The unique contribution of this study is its emphasis on the quality of implementation made possible for learners.

The implications for educational settings, therefore, are that successful implementation is about more than adopting a blended learning model or a digital platform. Indeed, much of the literature on blended learning to date has centered on issues of design, usability, and teachers' preparedness (Asrifan et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021), but the current study extends this by showing that, in under-resourced settings, institutional coordination is also a key success factor. Thus, in educational settings, the findings highlight the importance of developing contingency plans for variable connectivity and modes of participation and adopting a more systemic approach to coordination, which, in this case, extends the scope of previous implementation studies by recognizing the invisible work through which blended learning becomes implementable in practice.

For teachers, it also highlights the pedagogical value of adaptive enactment. This is consistent with PET-based research that has stressed teachers' work in policy mediation, rather than implementation (Ball et al., 2012; Bizami et al., 2023). More specifically, this study reveals that in rural IELTS-oriented BL, teachers' adaptation work often involves compensating for infrastructural instability, access disparities, and household-level constraints. This might include strategies such as offline solutions, pacing variation, print-based reinforcement, and supplementary channels. Of particular concern, though, is that adaptive enactment should not be overly romanticized as a means of addressing inequality. Teachers' agency is still significant, but adaptation work should not be left unsupported, or it could become an unsustainable form of "compensatory labor."

Taken together, these implications suggest that more equitable BL implementation in rural EFL contexts will depend on how well stakeholders move beyond a one-size-fits-all model of digital reform. In this respect, the present study contributes to previous scholarship by showing that the central issue is not whether BL can be introduced, but under what conditions it can be enacted meaningfully and equitably.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how blended learning for IELTS orientation was enacted in a rural EFL context and how unequal conditions shaped that enactment across institutional actors. The findings show that BL was not enacted as a uniform pedagogical model. Instead, administrators framed it as modernization and efficiency, teachers translated it through pedagogical improvisation, parents mediated it

unevenly within household contexts, and students experienced it through differentiated forms of participation shaped by their access conditions. In this respect, the study confirms the value of examining BL not only as a mode of instruction but also as a socially situated process of interpretation, translation, and adaptation.

The study contributes theoretically by bringing policy enactment theory into closer dialogue with digital inequality and digital capital. Previous research on BL has often focused on design effectiveness, learner engagement, or technology adoption, while treating inequality largely as a background constraint. By contrast, the present study shows that material access, social support, and digital capital did not merely condition implementation from the outside; they actively mediated enactment and shaped its outcomes. In doing so, the study extends existing scholarship by clarifying that enactment capacity itself is unevenly distributed, even within the same institutional setting.

A further contribution lies in the concept of silent exclusion. While previous studies have shown that digital learning may reproduce inequality through uneven participation, the present study adds a more explicit account of how formal inclusion within a blended learning policy may coexist with unstable, partial, or constrained participation in practice. This point is especially significant in IELTS-oriented education, where access to preparation is closely tied to credential-bearing opportunity and future educational mobility. The study, therefore, broadens current understanding of blended language learning by shifting attention from the outcomes of preparation alone to the unequal conditions under which preparation itself becomes possible.

Practically, the study suggests that BL in rural EFL contexts should be approached as a differentiated process rather than implemented through standardized rollout. Although grounded in one setting, the study offers analytically transferable insights for comparable rural and under-resourced contexts where digital learning unfolds under similarly unequal conditions. More broadly, it reinforces a growing body of scholarship arguing that the central question in digital education is not simply whether access has been expanded but how that access is enacted, mediated, and experienced across unequal social worlds.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the school leaders, teachers, students, and parents who participated in this study and contributed their time and insights. The author also wishes to thank colleagues and academic peers for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript. Special thanks are extended to those who provided practical assistance during data collection, coordination, and manuscript preparation.

Authors' contributions

Dr. Thi-Tuyet Tran was the lead author and took primary responsibility for the study's conception, design, and implementation. She also led the methodological development, data analysis, and the writing of Sections 3, 4, and 5 of the manuscript. Dr. Thi-Phuong Lien Tuong provided research support, contributed to the writing of Sections 1, 2, and 6, and undertook the revision and refinement of the manuscript in its entirety. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

No external funding was received for this study. The research was conducted with personal financial support from the authors.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

References

Asrifan, A., Zita, C. T., Vargheese, K. J., Syamsu, T., & Amir, M. (2020). The effects of CALL (computer assisted language learning) toward the students 'English achievement and attitude. *Journal of Advanced English Studies, 3*(2), 94-106. http://doi.org/10.47354/jaes.v3i2.88

Ball, S., M. Maguire, & A. Braun. (2012). *How Schools Do Policy: Policy Enactments in Secondary Schools*. Oxon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203153185

Bizami, N. A., Tasir, Z., & Kew, S. N. (2023). Innovative pedagogical principles and technological tools capabilities for immersive blended learning: A systematic literature review. *Education and Information Technology, 28*, 1373-1425. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-11243-w

Bui, P. H., Pham, A. T. D., & Purohit, P. (2022). Computer mediated communication in second language education. In R. Sharma & D. Sharma (Eds.), *New trends and applications in Internet of Things (IoT) and big data analytics*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99329-0_4

Chen, X. L., Zou, D., Xie, H. R., & Su, F. (2021). Twenty-five years of computer-assisted language learning: A topic modeling analysis. *Language Learning & Technology, 25*(3), 151-185. https://doi.org/10.64152/10125/73454

Graham, C. R. (2013). Emerging practice and research in blended learning. In M. G. Moore, *Handbook of distance education*, 3 (pp. 333-350). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203803738.ch21

Hanna, M. G., Pantanowitz, L., Dash, R., Harrison, J. H., Deebajah, M., Pantanowitz, J., & Rashidi, H. H. (2025). Future of artificial intelligence (AI)-machine learning (ML) trends in pathology and medicine. *Modern Pathology*, 100705. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.modpat.2025.100705

Kern, R. (2006). Perspectives on technology in learning and teaching languages. *TESOL Quarterly, 40*(1), 183-210. https://doi.org/10.2307/40264516

Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., & Baki, M. (2013). The effectiveness of online and blended learning: A meta-analysis of the empirical literature. *Teachers College Record, 115*(3), 1-47. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811311500307

Nguyen, Q. N. (2025). Affordance Theory in Language Education: A Multidimensional Framework. *TESL-EJ, 29*(3). https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.29115a1

Nuby, M. H. M., Rashid, R. A., Rahman, A. R. M. M., & Hasan, M. R. (2020). Communicative language teaching in Bangladeshi rural schools. *Universal Journal of Educational Research, 8*(2), 622-630. https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.080235

Pawlak, M., & Kruk, M. (2022). *Individual differences in computer-assisted language learning research*. Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003240051

Ragnedda, M. (2018). Conceptualizing digital capital. *Telematics and informatics, 35*(8), 2366-2375. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2018.10.006

Selwyn, N. (2016). Digital downsides: exploring university students' negative engagements with digital technology. *Teaching in Higher Education, 21*(8), 1006-1021. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1213229

Tran, T. T. (2023). Online-merge-Offline Model for distance learning in English language education: A case study. *Vietnam Journal of Education, 7*(3), 215-226. https://doi.org/10.52296/vje.2023.251

Tran, T. T., & Chau, T. H. H. (2024). Impacts of a blended learning model on EFL students' engagement and English proficiency: Evidence from IELTS preparation courses. *Innovations and Applications of Technology in Language Education*, 183-197. https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003473916-14

Tran, T. T., & Nguyen, H. T. (2024). Case Study. *Applied Linguistics and Language Education Research Methods: Fundamentals and Innovations*, 182-205. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-2603-9.ch012

Tran, T. T., & Sukying, A. (2025). Overcoming Barriers: Enhancing English Adverbial Mastery among EFL Learners. *NIDA Journal of Language and Communication*, *29*(46), 46-66. Retrieved from https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/NJLC/article/view/280620

Van Dijk, J. A. G. M. (2017). Digital divide: Impact of access. *The international encyclopedia of media effects, 1*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0043

Wang, F., & Wang, Y. (2024). How geographic accessibility and rural governance mitigate the impact of multiple risks on rural households' well-being: Evidence from the Dabie Mountains in China. *Journal of Geographical Sciences, 34*(6), 1195-1227. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11442-024-2245-8