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University ESL Instructors' Reflections on the Use of Blended Learning in their Classrooms

Said Ibrahim¹, Fauziah Ismail²

- ¹ Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia
- ² Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Malaysia

Corresponding author: Said Ibrahim [drsaidibrahim@yahoo.com]

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Abstract: Blended learning has been adopted in many universities worldwide since it combines the advantages of both online learning and face to face instruction. In this paper, the researcher reports on the quantitative segment of a mixed methods case study that was conducted in a public university in Malaysia with the aim of investigating the ESL instructors' reflections on the implementation of blended learning in their English language classrooms. More specifically, the researcher was interested in identifying the factors that enhance the implementation of blended learning and the challenges that seem to hinder an effective blended learning environment. The quantitative data of the study were collected by a survey questionnaire, which was distributed to at least 30 English language instructors. Nineteen instructors responded to the questionnaire, and the data were analysed by descriptive statistics via the statistical package for social science (SPSS). Findings show that while experience with technology and positive attitudes towards technology were identified as main factors enhancing the implementation of blended learning; workload and technological infrastructure were found to be the major challenges. The study signifies the need to address technology and workload related issues in order to effectively implement blended learning to promote ELT at tertiary level.

Keywords: Blended Learning, hybrid learning, Factors and Challenges, ELT

1. Introduction

The educational landscape is changing and much of that change has been the result of the increasing role of technology and the tremendous growth in online education. Blended learning, as one of the consequences of that growth in online education, has become a popular teaching paradigm in ELT in many higher education institutions worldwide (Tham & Tham, 2011; Rubio & Thomas 2014). That popularity stems from the potential of blended learning in improving the teaching methodology and the creation of an optimal learning environment for the learners. Blended learning is the combination of both face-to-face instruction and online learning. The idea is to mix the best features of those two environments into one mode where learners attend conventional, face to face classes along with accessing an online platform where they have to access extra resources or do homework, assignments, quizzes and tests. Blended learning is a significant delivery mode as it considers learning a constant process rather than a single time event, and it encourages students to be autonomous learners outside classroom settings. It provides learners with a learning experience that is flexible, student-centred and self-paced (Zhang & Zhu, 2018).

In the Malaysian context, many universities are implementing blended learning because of its effectiveness as a learning approach (Attaran & Zainuddin, 2018; Mohamad et al., 2015). Students in those universities attend face-to face classes and they also have to access the online Moodlepowered e-learning portal provided to them by the university. On the university e-learning portal, they get notifications, access course content and extra resources, do tasks and assignments, take quizzes and tests or have online forum discussions. The current study investigates blended learning in ELT in a Malaysian public university with the aim of exploring the factors and challenges of implementing it in ELT at tertiary education. The researcher believes that understanding the factors that may enhance the use of blended learning and the challenges that may hinder its utilization will help universities optimize the implementation of blended learning and make it an efficient paradigm enhancing language teaching and learning. Even though there is a body of research on blended learning and the use of Moodle in teaching and learning, that research focuses mainly on the benefits of blended learning; the research on the factors enhancing blended learning and the challenges that hinder its effective implementation is still limited (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019). Therefore, the objectives of this research are:

- a. To investigate the factors enhancing the implementation of blended learning in ELT at tertiary level.
- b. To explore the challenges hindering the effective implementation of blended learning in ELT at tertiary level.

2. **Literature Review**

2.1 **Definition of Blended or Hybrid Learning**

Blended learning, which is also known as hybrid learning, has resulted from the widespread use of ICTs in education in addition to the significant presence of online learning over the past few years (Norman et al., 2018). Blended learning means to deliberately integrate face to face teaching with computer- mediated online instruction with the aim of enhancing the learning process (Mohamad et al., 2015; Boelens, et al., 2017). A course is considered blended if between 30% and 80 % of the course is carried out online (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The term "hybrid learning" was often used prior to appearance of the term "blended learning" in higher education; however, now, both terms are being used interchangeably (Graham, 2009). In the context of this study, blended learning means that students attend face to face classes once or twice a week in addition to having access to the elearning portal, provided by the university, for resources, materials, assignments or quizzes.

2.2 **Blended Learning In ELT**

There is a body of research on the use of blended learning in ELT highlighting its effectiveness in enhancing the English language learning environment (Ja'ashan, 2015; Bakar, Latif, & Ya'acob 2017; Zhang & Zhu, 2018; Akbarov, Gonen & Aydogan, 2018). Students find language learning in a blended learning environment as more enjoyable and interesting than in conventional classrooms that rely solely on face-to-face interaction between the students and their teachers. They also find that blended learning is more flexible and more convenient as it allows them to learn anytime, anywhere and at their own pace. Moreover, it was reported that blended learning enhances the students' English language skills (Guangying, 2014; Ghahari & Ameri-Golestan, 2014; Hung & Chou, 2015; Tosun, 2015; Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017). In a blended learning paradigm, the learners can have access to plenty of language learning materials that the instructors upload on the online learning platform. In addition, the learners get to have more communication and interaction opportunities in English with their instructors and other learners. These opportunities are possible through the use of the e-learning portal as a communication tool via chat and discussion forums. Students can open a discussion or raise a question on the forum and converse in English with their teachers and peers outside the conventional classroom. Finally, it was found that blended learning increases learners' participation and engagement (Liu, 2013; Banditvilai, 2016). Some learners may feel unwilling or frightened to participate in the conventional face to face classroom while finding the online e-learning platform a non-threatening, stress free avenue for them to engage and comfortably converse.

Not only is blended learning beneficial to the learners, but it is also an effective paradigm enhancing the performance of the instructors in their teaching. Blended learning assists the instructors in better understanding their students' learning and in effectively tracking and monitoring their students' progress via the learners' online records and assessment tools (Tomlinson & Whittaker, 2013). In addition, the online learning tools enable instructors to design lessons and learning activities flexibly and efficiently. Instructors can encourage their students to familiarize themselves with the lessons online before their face-to-face meeting in the classroom so that more face-to-face class time is dedicated to discussions (Joosten et al., 2013), exchanging ideas or practising communicating in English. Therefore, bended learning enables teachers to facilitate students' active and interactive learning of the English language. In short, blended learning is beneficial to both learners and teachers; contributing to enhanced learning and better teaching.

2.3 Factors and Challenges of Implementing Blended Learning

The successful implementation of blended learning relies on numerous factors such as the quality of the virtual environment used (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016), teachers' attitudes towards technology and blended learning (Moskal & Cavanagh, 2013, Garrison & Vaughan, 2013), the technological knowledge and skills of the teachers (Betts, 2014) and teachers' workload (Ja'ashan, 2015; Banditvilai, 2016; Blanchette, 2016; Hamdan et al., 2017). Since blended learning depends extremely on the use of computers and web-based technologies, a high-quality technological infrastructure will lead to a successful blended learning environment. However, an inadequate technological infrastructure, such as unreliable internet connection or other technical issues and problems, will be a challenge impeding the effective implementation of blended learning (Guangying, 2014; Banditvilai, 2016; Hamdan et al., 2017). Therefore, in order to successfully and effectively utilize blended learning, it is essential for institutions to upgrade and maintain the technological infrastructure and make competent access to required technology by both learners and teachers.

Furthermore, research has revealed that teachers' attitudes and perceptions are of utmost importance in the implementation of blended learning. Instructors who have negative attitudes towards technology and its use in teaching will refrain from the implementation of blended learning (Moskal & Cavanagh, 2013). In addition, the quality of instructional and technological support provided to the instructors as well as the instructors' workload are important aspects when aiming for an effective blended learning environment. In that environment, the instructors are supposed to plan their teaching in advance and create activities and tasks that integrate face-to-face and online components, as well as monitor their learners' learning (Reinders, 2012). Therefore, if instructors do not have a reasonable work schedule where they have ample time to efficiently perform their duties in blended learning, they will find working in blended learning extremely demanding and will probably resist using it. Finally, instructors need constant training and support in order to be equipped by the adequate knowledge and skills necessary for a blended learning environment. The

absence of institutional training and support is a major hindrance to teachers' effective involvement in blended learning (Betts, 2014).

3. Materials and Methods

This study is a descriptive case study implementing a mixed mode methodology approach in exploring the factors and challenges in using blended learning in ELT in a Malaysian public university. A mixed mode design is gathering, combining and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data with the aim of obtaining rich data from multiple resources and hence gaining better understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2014). This article presents the quantitative part of the research; therefore, the researcher focuses on the methodology pertaining to the use of the survey questionnaire.

The survey questionnaire that is used in the current study is adapted from Moukali (2012). The adapted questionnaire comprises a total of 38 items segmented into four sections. The questionnaire questions are close-ended and most of the items use Likert- type scale responses in order to rate the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the items. The first section provides the researcher with necessary demographic information such as gender, age, academic qualifications and experience. The second section focuses on identifying the instructors' experiences with utilizing technology tools which may influence their implementation of blended learning such as LMS, Microsoft Office and search engines. Besides, there were some items pertaining to instructors' familiarity with some technology devices that can help implement blended learning such as Smart Board, Scanner and Video Camera. The third section of the questionnaire is intended to identify the instructors' attitudes and beliefs towards blended learning. The last section consisted of items identifying the main barriers or challenges influencing the implementation of blended learning such as the instructors' experience with technology, the technical support and training at the university and the technology infrastructure necessary to effectively implement blended learning.

Since The objective of this research is to investigate the factors and challenges in implementing blended learning in ELT at tertiary level; purposive sampling of English language instructors who are using blended learning in their English language classes at the university is the most convenient form of sampling. The survey questionnaires were distributed to all English language instructors who are teaching English course in the Language Academy at a Malaysian public university. The study received 19 anonymous instructors' responses to the survey. The researcher used SPSS for descriptive statistics to analyse the quantitative data from the survey questionnaires. The respondents' responses were computed into percentages and tabulated accordingly. The researcher has examined the reliability of the survey questionnaire as shown in Table 1. The reliability examined by Cronbach's alpha for each section are 0.779, 0.783, and 0.840 respectively. This indicates adequate consistency among the survey items.

Table 1 . Questionnaire Reliability Analysis

| Scales | No. of items | Cronbach's Alpha |
|---|--------------|------------------|
| Experience with Educational Technologies | 10 | 0.779 |
| Attitudes towards Blended Learning | 10 | 0.783 |
| Barriers in implementing Blended Learning | 10 | 0.840 |

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, after presenting the demographic data of the research respondents, the researcher provides the results and discussion of the two research questions from the survey questionnaire.

4.1. Demographic Data

Eighteen out of the total number of 19 participants were females with ages ranging from 30 to 60. Majority of the participants were lecturers over 50 years old with more than 30 years of English language teaching experience. All the participants had computers in their offices and about 84% of them had experience with blended learning as either an instructor or as both instructor and student. All instructors taught courses in blended learning, and almost half of them taught more than 4 courses in blended learning. The level of experience in computer usage amongst the participants varied between average and excellent, with 26.3 % of the participants having above average experience in computer usage, and an equal percentage of participants having almost an excellent experience. Table 2 provides a summary of the demographic data of the survey questionnaire respondents.

Table 2. Demographic Data of Respondents

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Gender | Female | 18 | 94.7 |
| | Male | 1 | 5.3 |
| Age | 30 - 40 | 6 | 31.6 |
| | 41 - 50 | 1 | 5.3 |
| | 51 - 60 | 12 | 63.1 |
| Experience Teaching | 5 years | 2 | 10.5 |
| English | 6 - 10 | 3 | 15.8 |
| | 11- 15 | 1 | 5.3 |
| | 16 - 20 | 1 | 5.3 |
| | 21 - 30 | 5 | 26.3 |
| | 30 + | 7 | 36.8 |
| Academic Rank | Associate Professor | 1 | 5.3 |
| | Lecturer | 12 | 63.1 |
| | Language Teacher | 6 | 31.6 |
| Computer in Office | Yes | 19 | 100 |
| | No | 0 | 0 |
| Experience with | No prior experience | 1 | 5.3 |
| Blended Learning | Experience as student | 2 | 10.5 |
| | Experience as instructor | 8 | 42.1 |
| | Experience as student & | 8 | 42.1 |
| | instructor | | |
| Number of Courses | None | 0 | 0 |
| Taught in Blended | 1 to 2 | 6 | 31.6 |
| Learning | 3 to 4 | 4 | 21.1 |
| | More than 4 | 9 | 47.4 |
| Level of Experience in | 6 | 4 | 21.1 |
| Computer Usage | 7 | 5 | 26.3 |
| _ | 8 | 3 | 15.8 |
| | 9 | 5 | 26.3 |
| | 10 | 2 | 10.5 |

4.2 Factors influencing the implementation of blended learning in ELT at tertiary level

Descriptive statistics from the questionnaire related to the factors influencing the implementation of blended learning included data pertaining to the following topics: experience with educational technologies and attitudes towards blended learning. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of the ten questionnaire items related to the instructors' experience with educational technologies: learning management systems, Microsoft office, Email programs, web search engines, electronic bulletin boards, web page editors, smart boards, digital video cameras and scanner devices.

| Table 3 | Experience | with | Educational | Technologies |
|----------|------------|------|-------------|-----------------|
| Table 3. | LADELICITE | with | Educational | 1 ccilliologics |

| Experience with Educational Technologies | Means | Standard Deviation |
|---|-------|--------------------|
| 1 Learning Management Systems | 3.11 | 1.05 |
| 2 PowerPoint | 4.42 | 0.84 |
| 3 Word | 4.42 | 0.84 |
| 4 Email programs | 4.53 | 0.84 |
| 5 Search engines | 4.53 | 0.70 |
| 6 Electronic bulletin boards | 2.68 | 1.11 |
| 7 Web page editors | 2.32 | 1.06 |
| 8 Smart board | 2.21 | 1.08 |
| 9 Digital video cameras | 3.37 | 1.12 |
| 10 Scanner | 3.79 | 1.32 |
| Overall | 3.54 | 0.58 |

While majority of the instructors were very competent users in E-mail programs and Web search engines (M=4.53, SD=0.84, 0.70), they had a competent level of experience in Microsoft Office Power Point and Microsoft Office Word (M= 4.42, SD= 0.84). Instructors' experience in using digital cameras, smart boards and learning management systems such as Moodle and Blackboard was average. The lowest frequently mentioned experience that participants had is Smart board (M=2.21, SD=1.08). These statistics show that majority of instructors had good experience with educational education and their experience levels are very close to each other.

Instructors' attitudes towards blended learning descriptive details are segmented in both Table 4 and Table 5. While Table 4 shows overall instructors' attitudes towards blended learning, Table 5 specifically focuses on the last three years and whether those attitudes have remained the same or have changed in a positive or negative direction.

Table 4. Attitudes towards Blended Learning

| Attitudes toward Blended Learning | Means | Standard Deviation |
|--|-------|--------------------|
| 1 it enhances cooperative learning | 4.05 | 0.91 |
| 2 administrators think it is important | 4.00 | 0.82 |
| 3 it helps with students' learning in a convenient way | 4.00 | 1.05 |
| 4 I am keen on using it for my classes | 4.00 | 1.05 |
| 5 it allows administrators to manage education | 3.74 | 1.15 |
| 6 technological infrastructure is ready | 3.00 | 1.16 |
| 7 increases student achievement | 3.63 | 0.83 |
| 8 it cater\s to students' learning styles | 3.95 | 0.71 |
| Overall | 3.80 | 0.79 |

The instructors' attitudes towards Blended learning were positive ranging between agree and strongly agree to the eight questionnaire items. The most frequently mentioned participants' attitude towards blended learning is that they believe blended learning supports collaborative learning (M=4.05, SD=0.91); and the administration believes that blended learning is important (M=4.00, SD = 0.82); and blended learning enables students to learn in a convenient way (M= 4.00, SD = 1.05). The lowest frequently mentioned participants' attitude towards blended learning is that they are not sure if the university technological infrastructure supports the implementation of blended learning (M=3.00, SD=1.16). Therefore, overall instructors' attitudes towards blended learning were similar in relation to the importance of blended learning and its significance in supporting collaboration among students and helping them learn in a convenient way.

Table 5. Attitudes in Last Three Years of Teaching

| Attitude in last 3 years | Frequency | Percentage (%) | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|----------------|--|--|
| Slightly more negative | 1 | 5.3 | | |
| Remained the same | 6 | 31.6 | | |
| Slightly more positive | 6 | 31.6 | | |
| Significantly more positive | 6 | 31.6 | | |
| Total | 19 | 100 | | |

Instructors' attitudes towards blended learning in the last 3 years, presented in Table 5, showed that almost two thirds of the instructors have developed more positive attitudes towards blended learning in the last three years. Only one third of the instructors have had the same attitudes towards blended learning while only about 5 % with attitudes that have become slightly more negative.

As shown in Table 6, the last item in the attitudes section of the survey questionnaire prompted the participants to explicitly state their preferences whether they prefer to teach conventionally in face-to-face classrooms or in a blended learning environment. While 78.9 % of the instructors either strongly or slightly prefer blended learning, 10.4 % prefer using conventional face to face teaching. Instructors with no preference towards either blended learning or traditional learning are about 10.4 %. Therefore, majority of instructors prefer using blended learning in their classes.

Table 6. Preferences to Teach Conventionally or Blended Learning

| Preference to teach traditional or blended learning | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|-----------|----------------|
| Strongly prefer traditional learning | 1 | 5.2 |
| Slightly prefer traditional learning | 1 | 5.2 |
| No preference | 2 | 10.5 |
| Slightly prefer blended learning | 5 | 26.3 |
| Strongly prefer blended learning | 10 | 52.6 |
| Total | | 100 |

Questionnaire descriptive statistics related to the factors influencing the utilization of blended learning in ELT at tertiary level have shown that experience with technology is a contributing factor in the implementation of blended learning. Questionnaire results have shown that while the majority of the participants were at very competent and competent levels of experience in email programs, search engines and Microsoft Office applications, they were average in using LMS such as Moodle and Blackboard. Since experience with technology is a major factor in the implementation of blended learning, it is necessary that the university promotes that experience by investing in training sessions so that instructors become competent in using all blended learning related technologies and tools especially LMS.

Another factor influencing implementing blended learning is the instructors' attitudes. Results from the questionnaire revealed that majority of the participants had positive attitudes towards blended learning believing that it enhances cooperative learning among students, and it offers them a convenient way of learning where each student can learn at their own pace. Two thirds of the instructors developed more positive attitudes towards blended learning in the last three years and have explicitly shown preference towards using blended learning over conventional teaching. Those findings are in line with the findings of Oh and Park (2009) who concluded that higher education instructors generally have positive attitudes towards blended learning and that they believe that blended learning enhances their teaching. The researcher finds that having positive attitudes towards technology and blended learning is a key factor that could enhance or impede the implementation of blended learning. Teachers who have negative attitudes towards technology and its implementation in teaching will resist the

implementation of blended learning (Moskal & Cavanagh, 2013). Hence, instructors' attitudes play a major role in the effective implementation of blended learning.

4.3 Challenges in the implementation of blended learning in ELT at tertiary level

The last section of the questionnaire comprised 10 items pertaining to the challenges in the implementation of Blended Learning in ELT at Tertiary level. The challenges or barriers in the questionnaire items included topics such as technology experience, technical training and support, internet availability, workload, attitudes, system user friendliness and students' technology experience. Table 7 shows descriptive details of the Challenges section of the questionnaire.

| | Table 7. | Challenges | in the in | mplementation | of Blended | Learning |
|--|----------|------------|-----------|---------------|------------|----------|
|--|----------|------------|-----------|---------------|------------|----------|

| Barriers in implementing Blended Learning | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|------|--------------------|
| 1 Technology experience | 2.79 | 1.23 |
| 2 Technical support | 2.42 | 1.26 |
| 3 Technical training | 3.26 | 0.93 |
| 4 Internet | 3.34 | 1.07 |
| 5 Computers | 2.32 | 1.06 |
| 6 Workload | 3.47 | 1.22 |
| 7 Colleagues do not like blended learning | 2.11 | 0.88 |
| 8 Contact with the students | 2.42 | 0.84 |
| 9 Complicated LMS | 2.95 | 0.85 |
| 10 Students' technology experience | 2.11 | 0.88 |
| Overall | 2.83 | 0.66 |

The most frequently mentioned participants' barriers to implement blended learning is that blended learning increases the workload (M=3.47, SD=1.22) followed by internet availability (M=3.34, SD= 1.07). The lowest frequently mentioned participants' barriers to implement blended learning is that their students do not have enough technology experience (M=2.11, SD=0.88). Therefore, majority of instructors share similar views regarding workload and the unavailability of a reliable uninterrupted high-speed internet connection on campus are the major barriers or challenges in the implementation of blended learning in ELT at tertiary level.

Amongst the main reasons for the teachers' resistance to the implementation of blended learning are the additional workload and the insufficient time (Betts, 2014). Instructors are supposed to plan their teaching ahead and design learning activities that integrate online and face-to-face components and also monitor their learners' learning (Reinders, 2012). Therefore, putting extra pressure on the instructors in terms of the size of the classes they are teaching or their busy schedules will impact their implementation of blended learning and may even lead them to refrain from utilizing it.

The second main hindrance to blended learning is the technological infrastructure represented in the lack of a stable high-speed internet connection, the lack of computers in many classrooms in the colleges where they deliver their courses and the lack of updated computers and software in many other classes. Since the implementation of blended learning relies immensely on the use of computers and web-based technologies, poor technical infrastructure at the university can be a real challenge to the implementation (Comas-Quinn, 2011). Therefore, the university needs to provide the instructors with the necessary technology and tools before requiring them to implement blended learning effectively.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has investigated blended learning that is described as the best of both worlds: face to face conventional instruction and online learning, in terms of the factors and challenges in implementing it in ELT at university level. An effective implementation of blended learning can by realized by maintaining and enhancing instructors' technology experience and boosting their positive attitudes towards blended learning. Instructors should be provided with workshops and training sessions in order to maintain and boost the instructors' technology experience and highlight the significant role blended learning can play in improving their instruction and the learning of their students. The university can enhance instructors' positive attitudes towards blended learning by offering incentives to the instructors and recognizing their effort in blended learning. Those incentives, in the form of "Award of Excellence" certificates, for example, can be a great gesture from the university acknowledging the instructors who put time and effort in implementing blended learning. Furthermore, overcoming the challenges of implementing blended learning is an important procedure that the university administration should take in order to efficiently implement blended learning. The university should make sure to provide the required technological infrastructure for the successful implementation of blended learning by equipping all classes with updated computers and software as well as providing students and instructors with reliable, high-speed internet. Finally, the university should lessen the workload of the instructors since blended learning requires the instructors' efforts and presence in both the conventional classroom as well as the e- Learning website. A flexible work schedule will enable instructors to effectively use blended learning and be enthusiastic about it.

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