Exploring Students' Readiness on English Language Blended Learning

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Abstract: Blended learning approach has gained popularity around the globe and blended English language teaching has become a matter of considerable interest. Many higher education institutions have adopted the approach, and this raised a question of readiness among the students involved. The study aimed at investigating the students' readiness on English language blended learning. A total of 137 students of different courses from a public university in Melaka participated in the study. They were asked to answer a questionnaire which involved five aspects to measure the students' readiness on English language blended learning such as technical abilities, technological accessibility, self-directed learning, attitude towards traditional classroom setting and attitude towards blended classroom setting. Six students were then selected to be involved in semi-structured interviews to identify students' views on English language blended learning. The study found out that students have low levels of readiness on English language blended learning in which they scored 3.28 to 3.54 in attitude towards blended classroom settings compared to their scores in attitude towards traditional classroom settings which are all above 4.00. The interviews revealed the reasons behind the results obtained from the questionnaire and one of them is that they enjoy learning English in a traditional classroom since face to face communication with their instructors allows them to remember better as well as enables them to gain more in-depth understanding of a lesson.

Keywords: Blended learning, English language, Students' readiness

1.   Introduction

The proliferation of technology is often met with a mixture of eagerness and hesitation. In the field of education, technology has emerged as a fundamental component across the globe and this has driven learning institutions and families to spend a lot on computers, mobile phones, and internet connection, to list a few, in order not to be left behind (Bulman & Fairlie, 2016). Educators have long incorporated technology in their pedagogical approaches and as it develops, it gives rise to a more flexible learning mode called blended learning (Porter, Graham, Bodily & Sandberg, 2016; Yulia, 2017). According to Okaz (2015), independently, face-to-face interaction will hinder students' ability to practise higher order thinking skills and it will also take away the chance for students to participate in collaborative learning. Graham

(2006) summarised blended learning as the latest teaching approach which combines face-to-face learning and learning activities through computer while Garrison & Kanuka (2004) described blended learning as the integration of face-to-face learning with online learning experience. Pandit (2015) defined blended learning as students learn in part through digital and online media where students have the control over time, place, path, or pace. In recent years, blended learning has gained traction since it offers the best of both worlds – face-to-face and online learning. However, the benefits or the effectiveness of blended learning should not be examined solely without looking at the aspects of students' readiness. Muhammad Faizal, Nur Amalina, Siti Nor Adawiyah & Farahiyah (2020, p. 1) mentioned in their research that, "the students have highlighted several enquiries regarding the internet stability, network coverage, and compatibility of the devices among many others". This shows students readiness should be taken into consideration before the implementation of blended learning. Therefore, the objectives of the current research are to determine the level of students' readiness for English language blended learning in a public university and to examine if there are any significant differences in students' readiness between students who are majoring in English language studies and students of other courses.

2.   Literature review

Wang, Han & Yang (2015) demonstrated in their research that blended learning's effectiveness is proven and its strength cannot be denied. They also mentioned that students in majority have positive responses to blended learning. Alpert, Couch and Harmon (2015) in their experiment found that no negative effect was found in their study in relation to the traditional face-to-face teaching (as cited in Bulman & Fairlie, 2016). In addition, Moussa-Inaty (2017) wrote that blended learning is said to offer a positive effect and it consequently reduces the possibility of cognitive overload among students. Blended learning also can enhance students' motivation since they have more freedom in their learning journey in addition to face-to-face mode which will allow them to discuss further or receive better clarification from instructors. Kenney & Newcombe (2011) found in their study that, in terms of grades, students who had undergone blended learning scored slightly higher compared to those who had not been taught through blended learning mode and this has made researchers to speculate that blended learning will become one of the competitive edges for higher learning institutions to offer to students (Matukhin & Zhitkova, 2015).

Among the strategies of the Malaysian government to get students to be proficient in English as outlined by the CEFR (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 - 2025, 2013) is to adopt ICT models to enhance the effectiveness of English language teaching. One of the models mentioned is the blended learning model. Kvashnina & Martynko (2016) found out in their study that students prefer blended learning in language teaching since they can utilise their own learning styles and strategies. The study also proved that students who learn English language through blended class performed better in terms of grade compared to the traditional instruction group. Hassan (2015) stated in his research that students find English language blended class to be more interesting as they found it very convenient to learn from videos featuring native speakers to clarify uncertainties and this has helped them to comprehend their lessons better. Khazaei & Dastjerdi's (2011) study revealed that using SMS as part of learning content can create a desirable condition to enhance the EFL learners' second language vocabulary knowledge. Numerous other studies have proven that blended learning indeed can contribute some positive effects in the teaching of reading skills (Saadoon Mohammed Alnoori, 2017), vocabulary (Khazaei & Dastjerdi, 2011), grammar (Aslani & Tabrizi, 2015), speaking skills, (Ginaya, 2018; Yang, Chaung & Tseng, 2013), and listening skills (Yang et al., 2013).

Despite the many advantages of blended learning, it is important to understand that the effectiveness of blended learning depends on several factors. One of the important factors is students' readiness. Possible barriers faced by students which might affect their readiness include difficulty in accessing online classroom material due to different socioeconomic backgrounds or lack of IT knowledge (Holley & Oliver, 2010) and low initiative to do self-learning (Vaughan, 2007, as cited in Tang & Chaw, 2013). Keskin & Yurdugul (2020) mentioned in their article that e-learning readiness is undoubtedly important for students to possess. They listed knowledge, skill, social, psychological, affective characteristics, and physical opportunities as necessary for e-learning readiness. E-learning or blended

learning, according to Hung, Chou, Chen and Own (2010), comprises components such as computer self-efficacy, internet self-efficacy, online communication self-efficacy, self-directed learning, learner control and motivation. Computer, internet, and online communication self-efficacies are related to skills for working with computer and internet access. On the other hand, self-directed learning and learner control include students' learning approaches, self-assessment, access to resources, resource management, and time planning (Keskin & Yurdugül, 2020). Consequently, students' readiness for blended learning might be measured based on several aspects. Based on previous literature, readiness in blended learning can be studied by assessing technology accessibility (Anene, Imam & Odumuh, 2014; Rasouli, Rahbania & Attaran, 2016), self-directed learning (Seraji, 2013), attitude or technology acceptance (El-Gayar, Moran & Hawkes, 2011), and skills for working with computers and Internet access (Rasouli et al., 2016).

Several researchers have outlined some important factors or learning aspects that should be considered if e-learning or blended learning to be implemented. Anene et al. (2014) studied the implementation of e-learning in Nigerian Universities and they discovered that technological accessibility, which includes hardware and software as well as internet access, is a crucial criterion in determining the success of e-learning. Likewise, El Gayar et al. (2011) posited that technological acceptance by students is as important in determining the success or failure of technological related learning and teaching. Holley and Oliver's (2010) analysis on students' experience of online learning revealed that students need to be able to control the technology as well as their learning space when it comes to blended learning. On the same note, Rasouli et al. (2016) have outlined five important factors to assess students' readiness for blended learning and two of these factors are skills to work with computers and the internet and self-direction. Furthermore, Vaughan (2007) stated that taking new initiative in learning may pose a problem for students. Following the discussion of the learning aspects that may influence the readiness of students towards blended learning (Anene et al., 2014; El-Gayar et al., 2011; Holley & Oliver, 2010; Rasouli et al., 2016; Seraji, 2013; Vaughan, 2007), a research model is proposed as depicted in Figure 1.
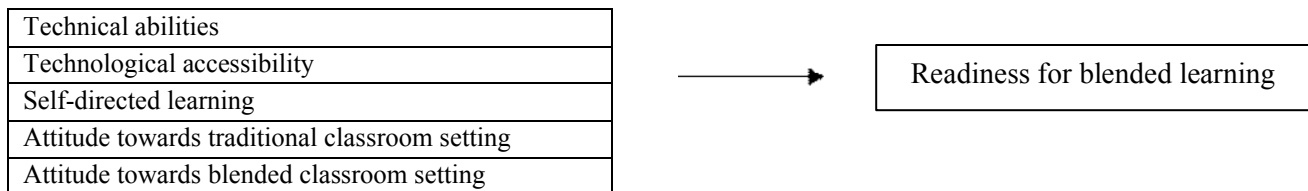
Technical abilities
Technological accessibility
Self-directed learning
Attitude towards traditional classroom setting
Attitude towards blended classroom setting

→ | Readiness for blended learning |

Figure. 1 Research model

The research model shows how the variables such as technical abilities, technological accessibility, self-directed learning, attitude towards traditional classroom setting, and attitude towards blended classroom setting interact to produce readiness for blended learning. As mentioned before, the variables were extracted from several literatures which are known to affect students' readiness for blended learning.

3.   Research Methodology

3.1   Data Collection

To collect data, a quantitative research design was adopted, and an online survey questionnaire was developed, followed by a semi-structured interview with randomly selected respondents. The design of the survey questionnaire started with a review of literature on blended learning and more than 30 items were identified (Anene et al. 2014; El-Gayar et al., 2011; 2014; Holley & Oliver, 2010; Hung et al., 2010; Keskin & Yurdugul, 2020; Rasouli et al., 2016; Vaughan, 2007). After carefully removing redundant items, a total of 27 items were selected. An item-sort method to match individual items to the respective aspects was done.

Random sampling was used to select 137 students from a public university in Melaka to answer the questionnaire. The sample comprised of 30 males and 107 females, their age ranged from 18- 24 years old and they were students of different courses such as Business Administration, Art & Design, Accountancy, Hotel and Tourism Management, Communication and Media, English for Professional Communication, Computer Science and Mathematics, and Plantation and Agrotechnology.

Triangulation method was employed to validate the questionnaire results and the interview results were compared. Six students were randomly selected to be respondents of the interview: four female students and two male students from Business Administration, Communication and Media, and English for Professional Communication. The interview was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of students' readiness on English language blended learning classes.

3.2 Reliability Test

Reliability test was conducted to test the internal consistency of the study instrument. Results of the tests are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability Coefficient of Study Instruments

Instrument	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Technical abilities	5	0.90
Technological accessibility	5	0.82
Self-directed learning	6	0.78
Attitude towards traditional classroom setting	5	0.92
Attitude towards blended classroom setting	6	0.84

Cronbach's alpha values for instruments in Table 1 are greater than 0.70. Therefore, the scale of all of the items can be considered as having high reliability since they are all greater than 0.70.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire in the study are analysed with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-v-17) software. Descriptive statistics of mean, standard deviation, and significant test were selected to ascertain the levels of students' perceptions in the Likert scale. Thematic content analysis was done on the data collected from the interviews. Students' responses based on the interviews were categorised into different themes such as their preference of face-to-face or blended learning and the reasons behind it as well as suggestions for the improvement of blended learning experience.

4. Results

4.1 Questionnaire

Survey results 1 revealed the level of students' readiness for English language blended learning. The results of the questionnaire are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Survey results 1

Item No.	Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
SECTION B: TECHNICAL ABILITIES			
1	I am comfortable using a computer.	3.88	0.86
2	I can install and uninstall any software and applications on a computer.	3.47	1.09
3	I am comfortable working with various software and applications on a computer.	3.44	0.91
4	I can confidently use web browsers on a computer to search for information.	4.18	0.79
5	I can confidently use a word processing software on a computer.	3.74	0.89
SECTION C: TECHNOLOGY ACCESSIBILITY			
6	I frequently use a computer to access the internet.	3.89	0.92
7	I have easy access to the internet on my personal computer on or off campus.	3.67	1.04
8	I have easy access to computer facilities with internet connection (computer labs, internet cafes, etc.) on or off campus.	3.53	0.97
9	I spend a lot of time on internet-related activities (e.g.: email, browsing, social media, etc.) daily.	4.11	0.87
10	I can easily access the online learning platforms (e.g.: iLearn, Edmodo, Google Classroom, etc.) used for blended learning.	3.87	0.80
SECTION D: SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING			
11	I am comfortable working and learning independently.	3.62	0.87
12	I always strive to do well when working on my assignments.	3.93	0.76
13	I do not wait until last minute to do my assignments.	3.58	0.90
14	I turn in my assignments on time.	4.09	0.78
15	I take notes when studying on my own.	3.80	0.83
16	I persevere when confronted with challenges.	3.73	0.74
SECTION E: ATTITUDE TOWARDS TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM SETTING			
17	I enjoy meeting and making friends in my English classes.	4.26	0.76
18	I enjoy receiving direct responses from my English teachers in class.	4.36	0.70
19	I find learning through face-to-face collaboration in English classes more effective.	4.29	0.75
20	I learn better through direct guidance from my English teachers in carrying out classroom activities.	4.31	0.69
21	I get more actively involved in English classes when I am physically in class.	4.16	0.78
SECTION F: ATTITUDE TOWARDS BLENDED CLASSROOM SETTING			
22	I find learning English online more effective and enjoyable than going to classes.	3.34	0.96
23	I find it easier to understand English lessons deeply through online platforms.	3.29	0.89
24	I find using technologies in my study will help me get better results in my English subjects.	3.53	0.88
25	I feel more motivated to learn English via online platforms.	3.28	0.89
26	I can easily carry out online English activities with classmates and teachers on and off campus.	3.54	0.87
27	I get more actively involved in English classes on online platforms.	3.33	0.97

Table 2 shows mean and standard deviation for all items in respective aspects. Mean for each item in Section E: Attitude Towards Traditional Classroom Setting is above 4.00 compared to the mean for all items in Section F: Attitude Towards Blended Classroom Setting which scored between 3.28 to 3.54. The mean for all items in Section C: Accessibility is higher than the mean for each item in Section F: Attitude Towards Blended Classroom Setting. The mean value for three out of four items in Section B: Technical Abilities is higher compared to all items in section F: Attitude Towards Blended Classroom Setting and the

mean value for all items in Section D: Self Directed Learning is higher than Section F: Attitude Towards Blended Classroom Setting.

Survey results 2 demonstrated the differences in students' readiness for English language blended learning between students who majored in English language studies and students of other courses. The results of the survey are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Survey results 2

Variables	Students of English for Professional Communication		Students of other majors	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Technical abilities	3.87	1.01	3.69	0.92
Technology accessibility	3.89	1.01	3.79	0.91
Self-directed learning.	3.73	0.84	3.82	0.83
Attitude towards traditional classroom setting	4.33	0.75	4.25	0.73
Attitude towards blended classroom setting	3.23	0.88	3.45	0.92

Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation between students of English for Professional Communication and students of other courses. There is not much difference in terms of mean values for these two groups of students, but the mean value for students of other courses in Attitude Towards Blended Classroom Setting is slightly higher than the mean values for students of English for Professional Communication.

4.2   Interview

Several leading questions were posed in the interview, all of which attempted to elicit the reasons for their answers in the survey that they did previously. Depending on their answers, more questions were developed there and then. In general, students were asked to choose and explain their preference between blended learning and face-to-face learning and to explain whether having access to the necessary facilities for blended learning might affect their preference. There were also questions on the types of problems that they had encountered previously while undergoing blended learning lessons and their thoughts on whether they find blended learning an appropriate platform to teach and learn English subjects. Students were additionally asked to comment on the available platforms for blended learning and their recommendations on how blended learning can be further improved.

The results of the interview were rather informative as we were able to shed light upon matters which otherwise may not be explained if the results of the survey were to be the only source of findings. Details will be discussed further in the following section, but in a nutshell, the responses were unexpectedly discouraging, and this is something that the survey failed to capture, unfortunately.

5.   Discussion

Responses in Section B (Table 2) suggest that technological knowledge might not be a deterrent in students' readiness for blended learning any more than their attitude towards blended learning. Positive attitudes towards blended learning have been proven to be important success factors (Kintu, Zhu & Kagambe, 2017; Selim, 2007). However, in the interview with the respondents, it is rather worrying to note that students citing blended learning as one of the reasons they fail to understand their lessons. This might have been contributed by how pessimistically they viewed blended learning and if this were to persist, it will come as no surprise to see blended learning being unfavoured by educational institutions. In the

interview, students also said that they were not fond of the idea that they must be responsible for their own learning, which is what is espoused in blended learning. Perhaps, that also influenced them negatively in their views towards blended learning.

The result in Table 2 shows that students tend to prefer traditional classroom settings compared to blended classroom settings. Recurrent comments and explanations from the interview conducted on respondents indicate that they enjoy learning English through traditional classroom setting better than blended learning because they felt that face-to-face class allows them to have an in-depth discussion with the lecturers to help them remember better. Students also claimed that they could understand a lesson better when they could interact face-to-face with their lecturers, and one student further stated that face-to-face learning poses less stress compared to blended learning. These findings corroborate previous studies on similar premises whereby students thought that communication with their teacher online was less personal, causing them feel less connected to their teachers and thus losing their sense of classroom community (Southard, Meddaugh, France-Harris, 2015 & Vonderwell, 2003).

Based on the results of the mean value for Section C and F of Table 2, it shows that although students are ready in terms of technological accessibility, they still have some apprehension towards blended learning. Put differently, technological accessibility proves to be a minor hindrance, but the same cannot be said of their readiness as students claimed in the interview that recurring technical issues such as malfunctioning devices and/or poor internet connectivity made them think poorly of blended learning. This result is quite unexpected of students whose ages range from 18 to 24 years old as they are considered as digital natives. However, since they first experience blended learning only when they enter university, that might explain why they are not ready in terms of their attitude towards it. Transitioning to a new model may involve some uneasiness among students (Knight & Wood; 2005) and because of these students may prefer the traditional way of learning (Chan, 2019).

According to Hassan (2015), students may have a negative attitude towards blended learning compared to traditional classroom learning due to the thought that blended learning is more time consuming. Interview respondents also remarked that they had a negative attitude towards blended learning because they felt learning online was unexciting and monotonous and they also resented the fact there were too many distractions that they had to fend off while undergoing an online class. They further elaborated that they value traditional classroom settings more because they have the benefit of immediate interactions with teachers and fellow classmates whenever they are side-tracked.

The fact that the survey focuses on English subjects makes researchers interested in learning whether there exists a difference in students' readiness between those who did not major in English courses and those who did. Based on the results shown in Table 3, it can be seen that although there is not much difference in terms of mean values for these two groups of students, the mean value for students of other courses in Attitude Towards Blended Classroom Setting is slightly higher than the mean value for students of English for Professional Communication. Interestingly, this shows that students of other courses may have a higher level of readiness compared to students of English for Professional Communication. Though there is no clear explanation for this, it can be assumed that students who majored in English prefer classroom settings more because they might find learning via computers or other devices a hindrance in enhancing their communication skills. Further research is suggested to understand this area.

6.   Conclusion

In conclusion, despite a rather positive outlook on blended learning based on the results of the survey, it was discovered that in the interview that followed, in reality, students were not much too fond of the idea that they need to interact online to learn a lesson. In addition, it was discovered that students of other courses reacted more positively towards blended learning compared to students of English major, though the exact reason for this is still unclear. Positive attitude towards blended learning has been cited as fundamental in determining how successful a student can be and that this is closely related to the state of readiness of the student makes the results of this study vital in order to make blended learning work to the

advantage of academia. Students today can be considered as digital natives and as such, this is well reflected in the results of the survey, in which they show that although students are ready in certain aspects such as technical abilities, technological accessibility, and self-directed learning. Nevertheless, when it comes to their attitude towards online interaction with teachers and classmates, we discovered that it was the opposite; students preferred traditional classroom settings more. The interview conducted revealed that students' learning preferences could be the contributing factor to explain the results from the questionnaire. All of the interview respondents cited the reasons they prefer face-to-face communication as learning is easier with the assistance of nonverbal clues such as facial expressions and body language of their lecturers and receiving instantaneous feedback from their lecturers are also helpful for them.

For students to be ready to embrace online interactions as part of their learning process, they must at first possess a positive attitude towards it. Therefore, based on this study, whereas more efforts should be exerted on the infrastructure development of information technology, we believe the priority should still come under making students feel the human connection in a class that employs blended learning. Pedagogical approaches must consider the human touch for online interactions so that students may obtain similar impressions like when they are in a physical classroom. One way or another, blended learning is here to stay and may even be more prevalently employed in the future. Therefore, more studies should be carried out to perfect this learning mode so that students will not be mentally exhausted and demotivated to make full use of this mode. Software which may produce real time interactions and constant feedback between teachers and students should be developed in order to improve the overall experience of blended learning classrooms.

6.   References

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