

Lecturers' Perceptions of Blended Learning Readiness

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ABSTRACT

Over the past years, many schools and learning institutions have provided websites and portals where teachers, tutors and lecturers can post and upload course information, additional exercises, tests and quizzes and even administrative announcements, so that students can conveniently access them from any location at any time. With students so eager to learn using technologies nowadays, it is no surprise that most technology savvy teachers are ready to use these types of instructional tools to help make learning more meaningful and motivating for the students. However, with the fast-paced technological advancement, some teachers are forever learning to use and integrate these technologies in their classrooms and failed, thus making them apprehensive of using technologies in language teaching and learning. This study was conducted to investigate the lecturers' perceptions of Blended learning readiness in UiTM using i-Learn portal as the teaching and learning platform. The study involved twenty lecturers from the Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Shah Alam. Data for the analysis were collected through the use of survey questionnaires. The findings revealed that most of the lecturers are ready to implement Blended learning despite several notable concerns.

Keywords: blended learning; e-learning; learning management system; lecturer's competence

INTRODUCTION

According to Nielsen ratings, watching television and accessing the Internet at the same time is the most customary media multi-tasking activity that occurs at least five times a week among Southeast Asians. Nielsen's Social Media Report 2012 also states that there is a 63 percent increase in the total time spent on social media in the U.S. compared to the year before. Without a doubt, technology is now a huge part of our lives as it rules over us, making it indispensable, facilitating tasks while adding excitement to our otherwise mundane daily routines. The need for technology does not only apply to youngsters of late Generation X or current Generation Y. To function in this modern society, every citizen, young and old, must have these digital knowledge and skills or else be left behind. This also means that educators must be at least at par with this tech-savvy generation. Education these days has evolved from the traditional teacher-oriented method to a more student-oriented method whereby students are given the chance to independently learn outside the classroom. To serve this purpose, gadgets and other forms of technological learning devices can be fully utilised and in fact are readily available and no longer alien to the younger generation. Olube (2006, as cited in Chan & Gurnam, 2009) stated that in a bid to prepare the new generation of teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge required by worldwide citizens of the 21st century, there is an escalating pressure in teacher education programs to integrate ICT in the teaching and learning of these teachers. Professor Kim Hughes Wilhem of University of Macau in her "In Search of Global Citizens" plenary address at the 4th Malaysian International Conference on Academic Strategies in English Language Teaching (My_CASELT 2012) encourages ELT professionals to "hone our technical skills and become more 'digitally adept'." This shows that there is a worldwide understanding that teaching and learning must no longer be restricted to books and chalkboard or whiteboard. Undoubtedly, educators need to be ready to use these technologies to deliver content to youngsters who mostly are more than familiar with gadgets and technology.

i-Learn Portal

The i-Learn portal, monitored by Universiti Teknologi MARA's i-Learn Center (i-LeC), is an asynchronous teaching and learning website that caters to the adaptation of e-learning in UiTM. Guided and operated by UiTM's Academic Affair Division (HEA), i-Lec designed this portal to provide lecturers and students a platform to immerse in e-teaching and learning. This portal which functions as a learning management system (LMS) enables lecturers to park their teaching and learning materials for students to download, engage in discussions with students via designated online forums besides uploading and administering quizzes and tests.

Blended Learning

Blended learning, or previously known as e-learning, or computer mediated learning is a growing trend among educators and it has become a more common practice for students and teachers alike. There are various definitions to Blended learning in which its implementation ranges from face-to-face and online to fully online learning. According to International Association for K-12 Online Learning, "blended learning is combining online delivery of educational content with the best features of classroom interaction and live instruction to

personalize learning which allows thoughtful reflection,” (www.inacol.org). In brief, Blended learning can be defined as the teaching practice that combines both teaching methods of face-to-face and online learning. Generally, Blended learning is a mixture of pedagogical tools in teaching and learning where it integrates face-to-face interaction with online learning experience.

Blended learning is especially important in today’s classroom as it addresses the expectations of 21st century learners, the digital natives, where their learning environment includes technology. To these learners, using technology is intrinsically a part of their lives.

There are many advantages of implementing blended learning model in class. One main reason to integrate Blended learning model as part of the teaching practice is that it provides new opportunities to enhance teaching and learning. Through Blended learning, each student is given the opportunity to participate in class activities. In addition, Blended learning helps students build their own learning community where they can collaborate with other students inside or outside their classroom. As the model is flexible and adaptable, teachers can create instructional activities and assignments that give students the opportunity to work collaboratively and encourage social learning. Furthermore, with Blended learning, students are able to access materials and resources that are prepared by their teachers or they can source for other relevant materials from the Internet to help them complete their task, to showcase their learning progresses and outcomes.

With the growing trends and implementation of Blended learning models, pedagogy has evolved as well. Teachers’ roles are changing as they evolve from ‘teacher’ to instructional guide, facilitator, and mentor. Instructional strategies have also evolved as teachers assess students’ progress and they use a variety of tools and resources, including digital content, to differentiate instruction in order to address the students’ different learning needs and styles. Apart from the advantages mentioned above, Blended learning also helps with teachers’ professional development. Implementing Blended learning model in their classroom helps teacher become more adept technology users and skilled at technology integration in a blended environment.

Statement of the Problem

Despite this understanding that technology and learning goes hand-in-hand these days, there are also concerns that the majority of those who are in charge of delivering educational content via technology are not skilled enough to use whatever ICT mediums available at their respective institutions. What makes it more critical is that many educational content experts, who were not entirely raised and educated in the age of ICT, are not even ready to incorporate ICT elements into their teaching. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), for instance, is one of the 20 public universities in Malaysia that strive to fulfill the Ministry of Education’s mission in establishing and developing Public Institutions of Higher Education (PIHE) that “will have the capacity to develop the reputation which encompasses dynamism, competitiveness, ability to anticipate future challenges including acting effectively and keeping pace with globalisation,” (www.mygovernment.gov.my). With a personal vision to “produce globally competitive graduates,” UiTM also has provided ICT facilities to its lecturers and students. One of UiTM’s

efforts in encouraging the use of ICT is the i-Learn portal where lecturers and students can access learning materials and quizzes as well as interact outside the classroom. Thus, this paper investigates Universiti Teknologi MARA or UiTM's language lecturers' perceptions of Blended learning readiness in relation to its implementation via UiTM's i-Learn portal.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to find out the lecturers' perceptions of Blended learning readiness in language learning and teaching by providing their feedback on the following matters:

- a) Use of i-Learn portal for Blended learning
- b) Lecturers' perceptions of readiness in Blended learning
- c) Concerns in implementing Blended learning

Scope of the Study

As the samples were only taken from lecturers of Academy of Language Studies in Shah Alam, it is not possible to generalise the findings of this study to all the lecturers of UiTM. Possibly, the study would yield different results, if all the faculties are surveyed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Models for Measuring e-Learning Readiness

A major factor influencing the success rate of e-learning is the teachers themselves. In fact, there are other significant elements that determine how receptive learners are towards e-learning.

The two most widely used measuring models are Chapnick's (2000) and Haney's (2002). These two models are mainly developed to measure the readiness of implementing e-learning portal for commercial organizations. Chapnick (2000) proposed a model for measuring e-learning readiness for any organisation before implementing the e-learning programs. He classified all the required factors into nine categories: (i) Psychological readiness, (ii) Sociological readiness, (iii) Environmental readiness, (iv) Human resource readiness, (v) Financial readiness, (vi) Technological skill readiness, (vii) Equipment readiness, and (viii) Content readiness. Another model, which is similar to Chapnick's, suggested that organisations look into seven important aspects which consist of ten key considerations per aspect, before implementing the e-learning portal (Haney, 2002). These aspects are (i) Human Resources, (ii) Learning Management System, (iii) Learners, (iv) Content, (v) Information Technology, (vi) Finance, and (vii) Vendor.

However, these two models were designed to assess ones' readiness or an organisation's readiness for e-learning, and thus are not suitable for assessing ones' readiness in higher learning institutions (Kaur & Abas, 2004). Therefore, Kaur and Abas have come up with another model called e-learning Readiness Research Tools, which is relevant for higher learning institutions. This model consists of eight dimensions; (i) Learner, (ii) Management, (iii) Personnel, (iv) Content, (v) Technical, (vi) Environmental, (vii) Cultural, and (viii) Financial readiness. In

addition to Kaur and Abas’s Model in measuring e-learning readiness for higher education institution, Lopes (2007) has adapted another model for measuring e-learning readiness called E-Learning Readiness Dimensions Model which was adapted from Borotis and Poulymenakou’s (2004) model. He argued that ‘The Training Process Dimension’ although is applicable for commercial organisations, it is however not applicable for higher education institutions as their core business or their core competencies are organising, analysing, designing, developing, implementing and evaluating an educational module. The figure below illustrates this adapted model.

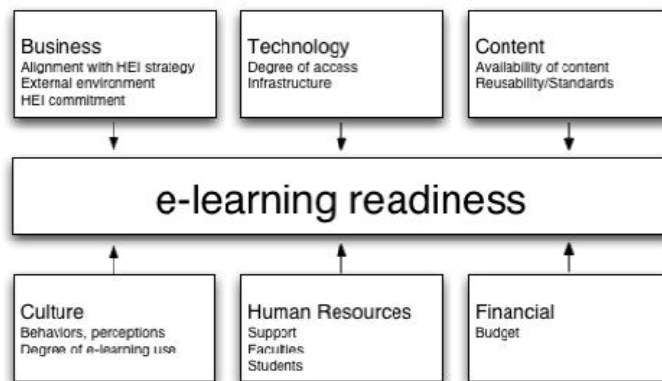


Figure 1 Adapted model for e-Learning readiness

In addition, Aydin and Tasci, (2005) argued that a standard model for assessing readiness for e-learning may work in developed countries such as the United States or United Kingdom, but it may not necessarily work with developing countries. Countries such as in Asia are still developing and struggling in terms of filling human resources especially in emerging countries, where e-learning is still in its infancy stage. They have come up with an improvement of assessing ones’ readiness for e-learning. The e-LRS model (Aydin and Tasci, 2005) analyses the resources, skills and attitudes the company or the institution possesses in relation to technology, innovation, people and self-development factors.

For this study, only phase one (Readiness) of the Readiness model was used, in which it comprises of technology, institution, people and content. The most important factor for a successful implementation of blended learning model is to have a computer and Internet. Technology can be described into two parts, hardware, which refers to the physical components and software; the information aspect of the technology (Rogers, 2003). The availability of both aspects; hardware and software were studied. This means, the availability, locality, stability and accessibility of computers or laptops and Internet for lecturers’ use must be present and the frequency of usage of UiTM’s learning management system among lecturers should be analysed.

Another significant component under Readiness phase is ‘People’. Lecturers, researchers and administrators have significant effect on the successful implementation of Blended learning. Therefore, it is important to investigate the skills, experiences, confidence levels and attitudes of these people. The experiences of these people with various ICT knowledge and skills in the past and their attitudes towards it greatly influence the readiness for e-learning. Those who have positive attitudes and high expectations of e-learning will “strive to work towards the desired outcome even if their progress is slow,” (Scheir & Carver, 1993). In addition, the ‘Content’ must also be investigated in terms of its existing availability, reusability, format, levels of interactivity and interoperability. Lastly, providing good infrastructure, supportive working environment, models and vast sources from the university or faculty is another way to justify e-learning appropriateness under ‘Institution’.

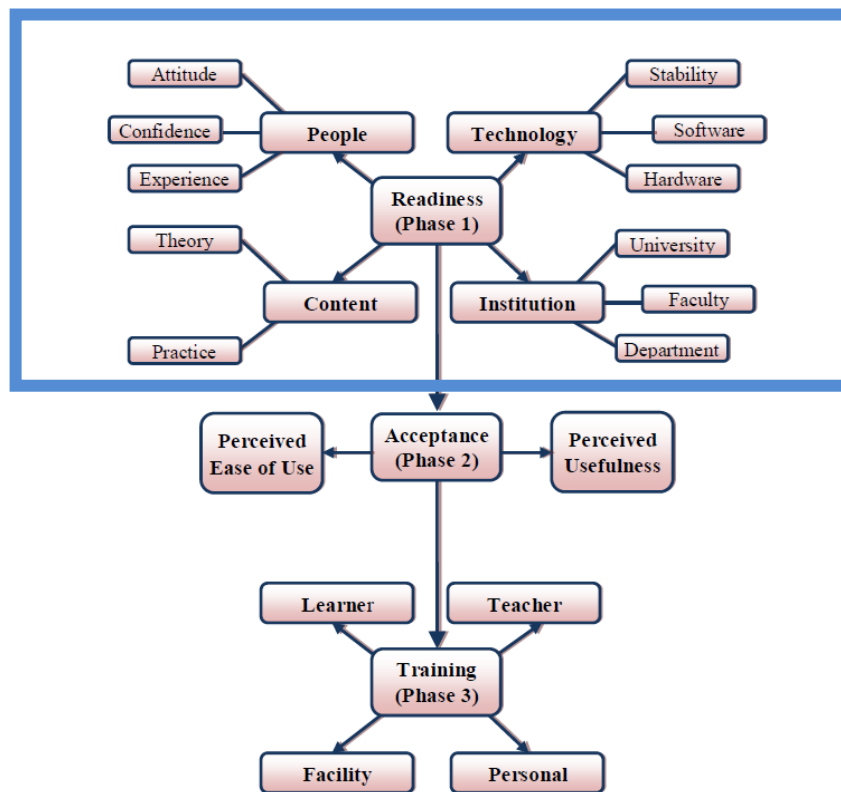


Figure 2 Readiness, Acceptance and Training for E-Learning Model (Akaslan & Law, 2011)

METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted based on Akaslan and Law’s (2011) Readiness, Acceptance and Training for e-Learning Model. However, it looks at only the first phase of the model, which is ‘Readiness’.

Instruments

The survey was conducted via Google survey or better known as Google Docs that were e-mailed to the Academy's lecturers. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections and was designed to elicit both structured and unstructured responses from the lecturers.

The first section captured demographic information specifically language department or language group currently teaching, presumed computer skills and knowledge level, place of frequently accessing the Internet and frequency of using e-Learning portal namely i-Learn.

The second section captured information on the dimensions involved on e-learning portal including lecturers' perceptions concerning facilities available on i-Learn. The questions also investigated lecturers' use of computers and the Internet, use of i-Learn, as well as their expectation and need for learning materials and additional features essential for language learning to be included on i-Learn. Questions directed at respondents' various use of i-Learn and concerns in implementing Blended learning required selection of item(s) most relevant or true to the respondent. Questions to elicit responses on Blended learning readiness, however, used the four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). Data were analysed and results were interpreted and discussed using frequency, mean and standard deviation.

DATA ANALYSIS

A thorough look into the collected survey data revealed the following items in accordance with the objective of the research.

Demographic profile

The 20 samples analysed indicated that those who responded were mainly servicing lecturers teaching English to various faculties (13). The other seven respondents were from the Asian and European language department that caters to various foreign languages. The majority of respondents placed their computer skills at moderate (15) except for the remaining five respondents who acknowledged their skills as Advanced. In terms of frequency of using i-Learn as an e-learning portal, the highest number of lecturers (8) indicated that they use i-Learn less than one hour a week. Only three respondents claimed to use i-Learn more than three hours a week. According to nineteen respondents, the most popular location to access i-Learn is from the office, in which means either at the lecturers' designated office rooms at various faculties or at the Academy.

Use of i-Learn portal for Blended learning

As language lecturers, respondents agreed in using i-Learn for a variety of activities ranging from administrative matters to monitoring students' progress and tracking down students' participation.

Table 1 Use of i-Learn portal for Blended learning

Tasks	No. of Respondents
To make administrative announcements	13
To upload tests and quizzes	7
To upload audio and video recordings	1
To upload reading material for students' references	13
To upload additional exercises / worksheets / learning materials for students	9
To access SuFO marks	17
To participate in online forums / discussions	7
To download students' assignments and projects	7
To monitor students' progress / track students' participation	6

Readiness for Blended learning

The findings gathered through online questionnaires revealed what lecturers thought of Blended learning and their responses to specified items depicted their state of readiness in implementing Blended learning.

Table 2 Readiness for Blended Learning (n=20)

Items	Mean	SD
I have internet connection at home	3.75	0.43
I have internet connection at the university	3.60	0.58
I am satisfied with my university network.	3.05	0.74
I use the Internet to browse for information.	3.70	0.46
I use email as the main communication tool.	3.50	0.50
I use social networking sites (eg. Facebook, Twitter).	3.10	0.99
I use instant messaging (eg. Yahoo messenger, MSN).	2.60	1.07
I use computers confidently.	3.55	0.50

Items	Mean	SD
I use web browsers confidently (eg. Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox, Safari).	3.55	0.50
I use search engines confidently (eg. Google, Yahoo, MSN Search).	3.60	0.49
I use digital file management tools confidently (eg. pendrive, CD, hard disk).	3.60	0.58
I have some information about what i-Learn portal is.	3.40	0.49
I have an i-Learn account.	3.30	0.71
I have time to access my i-Learn account despite my limited Internet access.	2.85	0.96
I have time to access my i-Learn account despite my tight schedule.	3.15	0.79
I have sufficient IT skills to navigate i-Learn portal.	3.20	0.60
I have considerable IT competency to prepare online materials.	3.05	0.67
I have enough time to prepare online materials.	2.65	0.79
I prefer handing out lecture notes/ assignments/ learning materials in classrooms.	2.85	0.73
I provide additional learning materials on i-Learn portal to aid my students in completing their assignments / projects.	3.05	0.97
I post additional exercises / worksheets on i-Learn portal so students can access them whenever they have free time.	2.75	0.99
I believe face-to-face interaction in language learning class is much more effective than using i-Learn portal.	3.50	0.50
I post announcements on i-Learn.	2.85	1.06
I post samples of past years' tests, final exams and quizzes on i-Learn.	2.85	1.01
I encourage students to do quizzes posted on i-Learn.	3.10	0.99
I prefer listening and speaking activities to be carried out in class than on i-Learn.	3.15	0.85
I believe students like learning on i-Learn.	2.90	0.77
The top level administration supports the use of i-Learn.	3.25	0.62
i-Learn is applicable to my department.	3.30	0.46

Concerns in implementing Blended learning

The survey questionnaires also brought forth issues that concern the language lecturers in executing Blended learning into their current teaching approach.

Table 3 Concerns in implementing Blended learning

Issues	No. of Respondents
Lack of technical training	13
Lack of awareness of e-learning benefits	7
Lack of understanding of what is available on i-Learn	8
Reliability of the technology	9
The i-Learn portal's ease of use (such as not user friendly)	6
Time to prepare lecture notes and learning materials	14
Additional resources required for development	8
Managements' encouragement / support	5
Students' attitudes	4
Others: Lecturers' attitudes	2

DISCUSSIONS

Use of i-Learn portal for Blended learning

The i-Learn portal serves different purposes to its users, both lecturers and students. For lecturers or facilitators, the usage is even more extensive as it was designed to encourage lecturers, as content providers, to incorporate technology into their teaching.

The most apparent reason for using i-Learn is to access SuFO (Student Feedback Online) marks (17). In UiTM, SuFO is important to lecturers as they reveal students' assessments towards lecturers' teaching skills and methods. SuFO "is introduced to replace the less efficient manual evaluation process with a more dynamic, user-friendly, flexible, near zero cost, accurate and fast SuFO with the result being a document required for promotion," (i-learn.uitm.edu.my).

The next most frequent use of i-Learn is to upload reading materials for students' reference (13). This indicates that lecturers are well-aware of the portal's function for disseminating course content. Despite this awareness, only one respondent uses i-Learn to upload audio and video recordings. This does not tally with the traditional methods of language learning whereby a lot of input in various forms (reading materials, audio and video) are used to complement the language learning skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing). In addition, thirteen lecturers agree in using i-Learn to make administrative announcements. This is where lecturers use the platform to make announcements on upcoming tests and other academic matters.

Lecturers' perception of readiness in implementing Blended learning

The majority of lecturers (15) strongly agree on the availability of Internet at home (mean=3.75, SD=0.43) and at the workplace or university (13 respondents, mean=3.05, SD=0.58). With that, they strongly agree on the usage of the Internet as a tool for browsing information (14 respondents, mean=3.70, SD=0.46) and they use both computers and web browsers equally confidently (mean=3.55, SD=0.50) for these purposes. In addition to emails (mean=3.50, SD=0.50), having Facebook and Twitter (mean=3.10, SD=0.99) and other social networking site accounts is another strong indication that these lecturers are capable of using virtual communication tools. In brief, they denote readiness in integrating ICT into their everyday communication.

To further indicate readiness in implementing blended learning, results affirm that respondents know how to use digital file management tools confidently (mean=3.60, SD=0.58). This means that lecturers have the knowledge on how to use pendrive, flashdrive, CDs and hard disk in which helps them to store soft copies of their lesson plans and teaching materials.

In relation to teaching, majority of respondents believe that they have IT competency to prepare online materials (mean=3.05, SD=0.67) suggesting considerable knowledge in using online applications and softwares. These online materials would include self-prepared soft copy files of lessons, activities, tests or links to any online learning sites. Moreover, the respondents indicated that they also provide additional learning materials, such as lecture notes, to help students complete their given assignments and projects (mean=3.05, SD=0.97). Despite a hint of optimism in providing additional exercises and worksheets online (mean=2.75, SD=0.99), there were however, a significant number of respondents (7) who disagree on posting optional follow-up materials online for the sole purpose of enriching their language learning experience. Nevertheless, most respondents agree that they do encourage students to complete quizzes posted on the portal (mean=3.10, SD=0.99).

All in all, the majority of respondents believe that they have sufficient IT skills to navigate i-learn portal (mean=3.20, SD=0.67). This has been clearly shown in the activities that have taken place on i-Learn.

Concerns in implementing Blended learning

Despite their readiness, respondents also have expressed their concerns on the implementation of Blended learning. Among the concerns were:

Time constraints

More than half of the respondents (14) believe that time constraints in preparing lecture notes and learning materials is the biggest concern in implementing blended learning. In UiTM, language lecturers prepare their own teaching materials with guidance from the course content or the curriculum. This means that a lecturer will construct various materials for different subjects rather than finding ready-made materials. With heavy workload, it is a challenge for lecturers to create additional materials to accommodate Blended learning.

Lack of technical training

To have a successful Blended learning session, adequate skills and training must be provided to lecturers and course facilitators. When lecturers or course facilitators lack technical training, it hinders the success of delivering the course content online. As shown in Table 3, thirteen respondents find that lack of technical training is one of the major concerns in a Blended learning environment.

Reliability of the technology

The effort in implementing Blended learning has often been hampered by the reliability of technology. The following items are crucial concerns to the implementation and success of Blended learning:

- a) Internet access
Not all places in UiTM have reliable Internet access or *wifi*.
- b) Softwares
Personal desktops or laptops provided by the university are not compatible with the latest softwares that might be used in implementing Blended learning. For example, some learning websites and intranet link cannot be accessed using certain browser or are incompatible with certain programmes and applications like Flash and Adobe.
- c) Classrooms and computer labs
Lecturers require well equipped classrooms (with computers and LCD projectors) or computer labs (with LCD projector) to prepare and conduct Blended learning. Hence, inadequate classrooms or unequipped computer labs will ultimately hinder the success of Blended learning implementation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research yielded notable conclusions and several recommendations with regard to lecturers' readiness in implementing Blended learning.

Use of computers

Currently, APB lecturers' utilisation of i-Learn is limited to certain basic activities. Teaching and learning the blended way can become more innovative and fun if lecturers are made aware of various teaching and learning applications or other modes of delivering teaching and learning content on i-Learn. Hence, lecturers should not restrict their 'existence' on i-Learn to viewing quiz marks and SuFO marks, uploading learning materials and posting announcements. To widen the implementation of Blended learning, lecturers should be exposed to other possibilities of Blended learning such as embedding multimedia content (audio and video), conducting testing and evaluation as well as integrating third party tools (Google Doc,

Padlet, Wikis and Blogs are such examples); and not just its basic applications.

Lecturers' perception of readiness in Blended learning

Based on the results of the study, overall, APB lecturers have the facilities and basic skills needed to conduct Blended learning despite not having enough time to prepare online materials or for some lecturers not being able to even log on to i-Learn. Moreover, APB lecturers also prefer to hand out lecture notes and assignments with the belief that face-to-face interaction is still the best method to teach a language. Therefore, readiness in implementing Blended learning is influenced by many factors that can be more encouraged with the help of the faculty or university management. The faculty or university management should be made aware that in order to fully implement Blended learning via a basic learning portal such as i-Learn requires the lecturers to have extra time away from classes, along with full support in terms of facilities and training. Apart from providing online learning workshops, the faculty and university management must be made aware that a packed teaching schedule with large groups of students can become a hindrance and hamper the motivation to take on Blended learning.

Concerns

There are undoubtedly many concerns in implementing Blended learning among language lecturers and these concerns range from administrative to personal aspects.

Time constraints

To address the time constraint issue, the department should encourage setting up material banks whereby lecturers can just retrieve uniformed teaching and learning materials that are accessible and reusable to be used in class or online. Therefore, there will not be any issue in preparing additional online materials that are suitable for the students' level of proficiency and at the same time cater to a specific group of students.

Lack of technical training

Although a lot of effort has been put into IT training for lecturers at the faculty (such trainings include LectureMAKER, Turnitin, iSpring, and i-Learn Blended Learning workshops), many lecturers have not yet mastered the basics in using computers, let alone more interactive applications that are useful for the success of Blended learning.

Reliability of technology

In accordance with the implementation of Blended learning worldwide, the university or the faculty needs to acknowledge the impending matters related to the reliability of technology. Thus, the university and the faculty need to ensure that the facilities are upgraded and improved in tandem with the technological advancement in education. This improvement or upgrade includes stable Internet connection, relevant and updated applications, softwares, and hardwares such as computers and tablets.

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