

Student Readiness on a Newly-Designed Blended Learning English Language Proficiency Course in UiTM

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ABSTRACT

In the field of education, technology has developed vastly in becoming one of the main media of instruction in schools, institutions or even training programmes. Educators from all over the world are now looking into new implementations in replacing the old conventional way of teaching to enhance a better learning environment among students in this era of globalization. Special attention is now focusing into what is known as a combination of e-learning and face to face learning (F2F) called blended learning. This paper was conducted among 156 Diploma undergraduates of the Universiti of Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, Malaysia which investigated students' readiness of a newly-designed blended learning English language proficiency course under the Academy of Language Studies (ALS). Correlation between students' readiness and their enjoyment going through the new course is also investigated. Findings indicate that Diploma students of UiTM Shah Alam exhibit above-medium levels of readiness toward blended learning and that there is a negative correlation between students' readiness with their enjoyment going to ELC classes. Further recommendations of the research are also discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Blended learning, Student Readiness

INTRODUCTION

Blended Learning

Recently there have been a number of empirical researches investigating in the area of blended learning. The topic has become a major concern, especially in the field of education where teachers, lecturers and instructors question, argue, discuss and experiment on the positive and negative outcomes it may influence teaching and learning environments. Even the term 'blended learning' itself has always been a constant issue to what it actually means (Twigg, 2003). Upon agreement from many researchers, blended learning can be defined as an effective integration of different modes of delivery, teaching and learning styles from an adoption of a systematic approach to the use of technology combined with the features of a face to face interaction (Krause, 2007). Different methods and styles of teaching have its own strengths and weaknesses. Although it seems that the implementation of blended learning has its challenges, weaknesses and risks either from institutions in Malaysia or from other countries, the basic concept still stands as a strong source of instructional method among many more researchers who believe in the imperativeness of students to adapt with the fast pace of technology. According to a study, blended learning is a resourceful methodology that can prop and augment meaningful educational experiences (Twigg, 2003; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

Through much research it can be considered that blended learning may provide a number of benefits whether in the area of education, business or even in the corporate industry which include; greater access to a range of appropriate, personalized and individualized learning and teaching resources, greater accommodation and convenience, greater flexibility, cost effectiveness and affordability, greater student and faculty satisfaction, help allay feelings of isolation, anxiety and frustration among learners, encourage participation in class, enhance learning process, improve pedagogical richness of face to face teaching and e-learning, broader opportunities, utilize computer aided assessments and technological adoption, as well as encourage and motivate students through interactive collaboration. (Boyle, Bradley, Chalk, Jones & Pickard, 2003; Dufy & Kirkley, 2004; Moore, 2004; Bonk & Graham, 2005; Sharpe, 2006; Sharma & Barrett, 2007; Stracke, 2007; Joachim & Petra, 2008; Bath & Bourke, 2010; Staker &

Horn, 2011). Taken together, this final group of assertions support the view that a blended learning system can provide strong positive implications to students' learning environment. Although even up until now, the majority of foreign language teaching and learning is still largely conducted toward F2F learning in classrooms, there is a rapid growth in the use of technology which provides language teachers and students with more opportunity in exploring the most suitable mix of teaching and learning styles for a given task. Purcell, Heaps, Buchanan and Friedrich (2013) claim that students nowadays should be introduced with more combination of online learning and traditional classes because they are familiar with technology since they were born. Thus, it is believed that with the combination of both F2F learning and web-based technology, students learning a language can gain more benefit and experience a more quality education.

Furthermore, it is also proven that with the use of a blended learning environment, this can create opportunities for learners in overcoming the problem of applying the language not only in class, but also outside of class since blended learning focuses on the attempt to encourage and develop independent learning or known as 'autonomous learning'. As stated from Motteram and Sharma (2009), cited from Barrs (2011), with the usage of interactive, communicative and collaborative platforms such as the email, instant messaging, wikis, blogs, forums, social-networking sites and virtual learning environments, students learning a foreign language are able to overcome the disconnection of applying the language outside the classroom. The implementation of blended learning may also help teachers and students in overcoming the major problem of time constraints.

Student Readiness

The concept of student readiness in an online environment was introduced in 1998 by Australian researchers known as Warner, Christie and Chow who defined it into three categories; students' preferences for the form of delivery as opposed to face-to-face classroom instructions; student confidence in using electronic communication for learning and, in particular students' ability in the use of Internet and computer-mediated communication; and also the ability to engage in autonomous learning (Hung, Chou, Chen, & Own, 2010). Subsequently, more and more researchers around the world began to further develop extensive and intensive

theories on student readiness in the blended learning environment. In 2010, Hung, Chou, Chen and Own developed and validated a multidimensional instrument for college students' readiness on online learning known as the Online Learning Readiness Scale (OLRS) that was categorized into five dimensions including; self-directed learning, motivation for learning, computer/Internet self-efficacy, learner control, and online communication self-efficacy. Student readiness can be separated into two components, which are technical readiness and self-directed readiness.

Academy of Language Studies, UiTM

In Universiti Teknologi MARA, the Department of English and Linguistics is the largest department in the Academy which caters all English language needs of the University. For Diploma levels, APB provides courses such as; Consolidating Language Skills (BEL 120); Communication Skills (BEL 130); Preparatory Course for MUET (BEL 260); English for Academic Purposes (BEL 311); as well as English for Occupational Purposes (BEL 312). Coming into the new millennium, Malaysia's former Ministry of Higher Education urged universities across the country to focus more on the fundamentals of life-long education as well as the need of ICT in higher education under the 11th Malaysian Plan (cited in Chai & Poh, 2009) from Farahiza (2010).

Along with this parallel goal of the government, UiTM also strive its best in fully utilizing every technology provided within the medium of instruction. With the inspiration to develop UiTM in becoming a distinguished and international standard university, the implementation of blended learning was established in 2009 under the collaboration between the Academic Affairs Division and i-Learn Centre. The programme involves both students and lecturers which is also aimed to reduce problems of space constraints in face to face learning environment. Two models were developed under this programme including Model A and Model B which differentiate the lessons being learnt in a specific week. For example Model A provides a combination of two hour face to face learning with a two-hour e-learning in one whole week while Model B is also a combination of both, but conducted through a four hour face to face learning in one week and another 4 hour fully online learning in a different week. However, the distribution of hours is optional in UiTM whether it may be under the ratio of 50:50, 60:40, or

70:30. In addition, extension of tutorial sessions which is entirely based on e-learning is also being encouraged in the institution (Blended Learning for Lecturers, Students and Admin Guideline of UiTM, 2009).

Based on these models, the Academy of Language Studies developed a new English course named as “Integrated Language Skills” (ELC) replacing BEL 120, BEL 260 as well as BEL 311 which has been launched for only one semester. Unlike before, where the previous course combined all the four components of English namely listening, reading, writing and speaking, this new course focuses on only one particular skill for one semester. Semester one (1) focuses on the skill of listening; semester two (2) focuses on the skill of speaking; semester three (3) focuses on reading; and semester four (4) focuses on writing. Although ELC remains a three hour credit, the new course includes a three hour face to face session per week and an addition of three and a half hours for e-learning in which students must complete certain individual and group-work tasks. Since the design of ELC requires students to participate more actively during class and also during non face to face sessions, it is important that students motivate themselves in adopting with different learner strategies in order to be able to keep in pace with the new course. As a whole, this new course is developed not only for the goal of enhancing language skills, but also designed to equip students with necessary skills that are able to boost their confidence when communicating in English. With the inclusion of the blended learning system, students no longer go through the ‘chalk-and-talk’ system where they must listen to the teachers’ instructions, but are now able to participate more actively by utilizing a variety of materials in varied situations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It is important to understand that in order to discover the effectiveness of a particular blended learning course, there are numerous ways for a researcher to look into. Studies carried out by Huey, Foong, and Salwah (2007) and Hung, Chou, Chen, and Own (2010) as well as other numerous foreign and local research have indicated that the effectiveness of blended learning is attached closely with students’ behaviour which can be predicted through students’ readiness to learn. Although in UiTM itself, literature shows that there are a number of research done that look into student readiness

(Norshima, Syazwan, Nor Azilah, & Annurizal, 2013; Lai & Chong, 2007; Chow, Foong, & Salwah, 2007; Junaidah, 2007) no study has actually been conducted to investigate student readiness under UiTM's new English course, ELC which was launched in March 2014.

Therefore, as new innovations of blended learning modes are continuously being examined across the globe, it is vital that an investigation on student readiness should also be conducted upon this newly-designed blended learning English Language Proficiency course under the Academy of Language Studies (ALS) of the Universiti of Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Due to the gap of knowledge, it is prominently clear that there is a need to extend further research in the field of blended learning so that researchers and especially educators are able to identify the best practice or model that can be implemented under a blended learning system. The result of the study is believed to be beneficial for many parties especially in the field of education where the knowledge of different language-based blended learning models can be extended and also for the future advantage of the Academy of Language Studies (ALS) as well as for Universiti Teknologi MARA as a whole.

Research Questions

Research questions that will be investigated in this study include:

1. Are Diploma students of UiTM Shah Alam ready for this newly-designed blended learning course?
2. How does students' enjoyment going to ELC classes correlate with their readiness of the new course?

Research Design

As qualitative and quantitative approaches were conducted, the main research design in this study is regarded as a mixed methods research design. As the main aim of this study is to investigate students' readiness in blended learning for ELC, the quantitative approach will provide the breadth in the findings and the qualitative approach will provide depth in understanding the phenomenon under scrutiny. In this study qualitative design comprises a

10% interview session with the students while quantitative design includes descriptive surveys looking at the average score of students' readiness and correlation coefficient which looks at the relationship between students' readiness and students' enjoyment going to ELC classes.

Sample

The total number of UiTM Shah Alam students is approximately 47,000 which include various faculties and programmes. Sampling in this research however involves a population of 289 Diploma students. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970) the appropriate number of respondents from a population of 280 is 160. Therefore, as means of reliability, the number of respondents from this study is 156 students ranging from 19 to 23 years old. These students are Diploma undergraduates from the Faculty of Art Design and the Faculty of Sport Sciences, mostly comprised Malay students or *Bumiputras* (indigenous) from semester one (1) to two (2) which were chosen through a purposive sampling technique. The reason for choosing Art and Design as well as Sport Sciences students is because they make up of the largest number of all Diploma programmes in UiTM, Shah Alam compared to other minor programmes such as Business Management and Accountancy which only had not more than 30 students.

Data Collection

Two (2) methods were applied in the process of collecting data in this particular research; First – distribution of questionnaires and second – interview sessions. For the first process, distribution of questionnaires was conducted at UiTM Shah Alam's main hall, Dewan Agung Tuanku Canselor (DATC). Among 230 students, only 156 questionnaires were retrieved and a number of 15 students were willing to participate in the interview session. The interview session was also conducted at DATC which was done right after all the questionnaires were obtained.

Instrumentation

In this research, the main instrument used is the questionnaire based on a research of Hung, Chou, Chen, and Own (2010) who conducted a study in investigating the most reliable and valid system that measures student readiness in the blended learning context called The Online Learning

Readiness Scale (OLRS). In addressing terms of reliability and validity, the researchers used a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate the hypothetical model of the study which resulted into categorizations of five dimensions including; self-directed learning (0.871), motivation for learning (0.843), computer/Internet self-efficacy (0.736), learner control (0.727), and online communication self-efficacy (0.867). As the OLRS measurement model of student readiness composites a reliability of more than 0.7, the model is considered an acceptable value for reliable construct (Fornel & Lacker, 1981).

The questionnaire was divided into 4 sections including Part A, Part B, Part C, and Part D. Part A requires the respondents' demographic data; Part B includes 3 subjective questions where participants are able to explain certain reasons to their answers; Part C includes a number of 36, 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agrees) on their readiness of a blended learning environment in ELC; and Part D provides a list of six options for participants to tick on their opinions that lead to a successful blended learning environment. Furthermore, 10% of the respondents were randomly chosen to be interviewed.

Data Analysis

The data in the study is analyzed using inferential statistics which allow researchers to make inferences from the sample. The main statistical tool that is used in the study is descriptive analysis which is conducted to investigate the average score of students' readiness. Besides that, the study also uses a correlation technique. Moreover, data from the interview sessions were tapped, transcribed and categorized into two groups which are; students who preferred blended learning in an English class; and students who preferred face to face learning in an English class.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Are Diploma Students of UiTM Shah Alam Ready for this Newly-designed Blended Learning Course?

From the Table 1, the mean score for Students Readiness is 3.9144. According to the designer of the OLRS model, a mean score that ranges

from 3.60 to 4.37 indicates that students exhibit above-medium levels of readiness (Hung, Chou, Chen & Own, 2010). As the mean score for the Art and Design as well as Sport Sciences Diploma students in UiTM, Shah Alam ranges from 3.60 to 4.37, it can be concluded that these particular students exhibit above-medium levels of readiness upon the ELC course.

Table 1: Student Readiness Average

	Average Score
Mean	3.9144
Median	3.9722
Std. Deviation	.52343
Skewness	-.229
Total	156

Statistical analysis from the findings shows that the average score of student readiness is 3.9722 indicating that Diploma students of Art and Design as well as Sport Sciences of UiTM, Shah Alam exhibit above-medium levels of readiness in ELC which is believed to be related with students' good computer skill knowledge as well as feeling of comfort in using technology and browsing the internet. This conclusion is also derived from the interview session which showed that all of the students did not mention anything on the difficulties of using computers or soft-ware during ELC classes but was more to difficulties in completion of tasks. Therefore, this research supports the view from Purcell, Heaps, Buchanan and Friedrich (2013) which claim that students nowadays should be introduced with more combination of online learning and traditional classes because they are familiar with technology since they were born. Findings from Purcell, Heaps, Buchanan and Friedrich (2013) show that 67% of students from the United States are comfortable using technology and 85% of them use it daily.

How Does Students' Enjoyment Going to ELC Classes Correlate with their Readiness of the New Course?

The data show that there is a weak negative correlation between enjoyment of going to ELC classes with students readiness in the course ($r = -.165$, $p\text{-value} = .040$) which implies that students who enjoyed going to ELC classes reported lower student readiness on the new course.

Table 2: Correlations between Readiness and Enjoyment in ELC Classes

		Do you enjoy going to ELC classes?	Student Readiness Average Score
Pearson Correlation	Do you enjoy going to ELC classes?	1	-.165*
	Student Readiness Average Score	-.165*	1
Sig. (2 tailed)	Do you enjoy going to ELC classes?		.040
	Student Readiness Average Score	0.40	
N	Do you enjoy going to ELC classes?	156	156
	Student Readiness Average Score	156	156

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The study finds an interesting discovery that although there was a high percentage of students who believed that technology would increase motivation, data show that there is a weak negative correlation between enjoyment of going to ELC classes with students readiness in the course ($r = -.165$, $p\text{-value} = .040$). This simply means that students who enjoyed going to ELC classes reported lower student readiness of the new course ($M = 3.9722$). Fortunately, this circumstance can be explained through the 10% sample of students who were interviewed in the study. Findings show that a majority of the students from this group did feel nervous or unconfident for several reasons. Although all of the students from this group agreed that blended learning is preferable for an English class, one particular student mentioned that the reason she felt unconfident in doing the online assignments was her concern that it may affect her CGPA while another student clearly explained that the nervousness comes only when the task was thought to be too challenging and nothing to do with the other daily activities. This can be understood that the factor which made students enjoy going to ELC classes was primarily for other reasons that did not relate with online tasks.

Results from the interview also revealed that students who liked going to ELC classes had higher expectations of themselves and that the challenge in online tasks made them worried and sometimes unconfident if they were not able to meet these expectations. The study therefore concludes that there is a high probability that the ELC online assignments might be too difficult for the Diploma students' level and that it should be re-examined to avoid future complications of the new blended learning design. This situation clearly highlights a study from Marsh (2012) who stated that because pushing up motivation is also perceived as a great challenge in language learning, it is essential to have the right level of motivation in a language class because if an instructor gives a task which is too easy, it is unlikely for the students to improve, while if the tasks given are too difficult, this might cause students to give up easily. Furthermore, if students are given tasks that do not interest them, this would fail to motivate the students at all.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of the study reveal that students' readiness of certain blended learning environments can be closely connected with their relationships with the instructors. Therefore, the study suggests that teachers, lecturers or instructors of a blended learning class must not only focus on the tasks given to students but must also look into aspects of the learners itself. This way, as students develop the knowledge of managing to become more organized in a blended learning environment they also become more interested in participating in class. Practicing these activities in a blended learning class before giving the students their main tasks is believed to be able to reduce anxiety as well as encourage students to develop a close relationship with their instructors. At the same time, these friendly activities also allow lecturers to get to know more of the students' strengths and weaknesses in a blended learning English language proficiency course.

Apart from that, the study also reveals that the importance of a lecturers' role in inculcating constant motivation among students. According to Lai (2011) in this technological era, extrinsic motivation is considered a vital element in increasing motivation in a classroom which is governed by reinforcement contingencies where it involves constellation of closely related beliefs, perceptions, values, interests and actions. The study suggests

that as instructors, it is significant that reminders of positive words should constantly be articulated to the students so that they are always in a positive mind and attitude, especially in a blended learning environment where students need to step out of their comfort zone.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

It is vital that further research should be done to investigate effective teaching instructions in a blended learning environment which can lessen student's anxiety as well as an intensive investigation in improving tasks distribution in the online ELC courses which should also focus to lessen anxiety among students. Based on this study, it is believed that tasks which are too difficult could lead to anxiety in a blended learning environment and that ineffective teaching instructions could cause lack of motivation from students. Effective teaching instructions include minor tasks and activities that can be conducted in a blended learning class in order to encourage students to become more confident. On the other hand, tasks distribution in a blended learning environment should focus on aspects which can be too difficult for different learners' prior knowledge in technology. Therefore, future research should look into different levels of blended learning tasks for different levels of students.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study is to find out whether Diploma students of Art and Design as well as Sport Sciences in UiTM Shah Alam are ready to learn the newly-designed blended learning English language proficiency course, called ELC. The study also investigates whether there are differences among different gender, courses and semesters as well as seeking out on the relationship between students' enjoyment going to ELC classes with their readiness on the new course and the relationship between students' perception of technology as a tool for increasing motivation in learning with their enjoyment going to ELC classes.

Based on evidence from the findings, it can be concluded that Diploma students from semester one and two, Art and Design programmes as well as

Sport Sciences programmes attitude and readiness on this particular newly-designed blended learning English language proficiency course is mainly affected by the students' attitudes and belief of instruction in the course with less impinge on the design, technological tools, content, management or infrastructure of ELC. This discovery can be connected with other empirical research findings that the effectiveness of a blended learning environment is attached closely with students' behaviour which can be predicted through students' readiness of learning (Huey, Foong & Salwah, 2007). That is why according to Brophy (2010) in blended learning, students' motivation is strongly believed to be related to intrinsic motivation which is connected with students' thoughts, beliefs, goals and situated dynamic relationships between students and the environment.

In this case, intrinsic motivation was found to be largely due to students' relationship with the instructors as supported from evidence from statistical analysis as well as interview sessions. It seems that the main reason students liked going to ELC classes was because of their fondness of the instructors' teaching style as well as the instructors' attitudes towards the students. Readiness in the ELC course was also linked to students' goal to do the best in class so that they would impress the lecturer and so that they would achieve good grades in their CGPA. When it comes to difficulties in completing the tasks in ELC, students seem to become more confident and comfortable only with the guidance and support of their lecturers, regardless if they are taking Listening Skills in semester one or Reading Skills in semester two. Without motivation from the lecturers, students become nervous, embarrassed and de-motivated in going through the learning process.

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