International Journal of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics
e-ISSN: 2600-7266

A Study on Learners' Readiness and Perceptions of the Implementation of Blended Learning in UiTM Kedah

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Abstract

The increase in student enrolment and the need to cater to students of diverse backgrounds have led to the adoption of blended learning in many higher learning institutions. Blended learning, which allows both face to face interaction and on-line delivery, has been adopted into many curricula. One such institution is University Technology MARA which is slowly introducing features of blended learning in its course syllabus beginning with practice to online assessments. However, to ensure successful implementation of blended learning as part of the curricula, there are several aspects for consideration such as learner and teacher readiness for blended learning. This paper examines issues regarding the use of blended learning as a delivery method at UiTM Kedah . The discussion in this paper focuses on learner' readiness and perceptions of the blended learning environment. The data collected for this study are responses from learners to a questionnaire survey. The research findings form the basis for recommendations for the development of learning and teaching practices using blended learning approaches to enhance learners' learning experiences.

Keywords: blended learning, on-line delivery, learners' readiness, learners' learning experiences

Introduction

What is Blended Learning?

There are no generally accepted definitions of blended learning. Most researchers would agree that blended learning can be described as a combination of online learning and face-to-face interaction (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Some examples are the blending of classroom and online instruction, online instruction with access to a coach or faculty member, simulations with structured courses, on the job training with informal sessions and managerial coaching with e-learning activities.

Graham (2006) defines blended learning as one that combines face to face instruction with computer mediated instruction. According to him, blended learning is the combination of instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional Face to Face (F2F) learning systems and distributed learning systems. He also emphasizes the central role of computer based technologies in blended learning.

Another definition given by Picciano, Dziuban, & Graham (2014), the word 'blended' implies a combination or mixture. He describes the process of blended as mixing of two paint colours and the end result is a totally new colour that has no trace of the earlier colour. Thus, it will provide a perfect fusion of online and classroom learning which is conducive for today's learners.

Blended Learning in Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia

At present, there is a change in Malaysian classroom as elsewhere in the world from the traditional teacher-centred models to a more student-centred one (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2009). These trends result in changes in the focus of instrucrion from a transmission curriculum to a transactional curriculum (Dass & Ferguson, 2012).

Blended learning has gained popularity at higher education institutions as it is viewed as offering more choices and being more effective due to the multiple delivery modes. Some benefits attributed to blended learning include the development of social competence and critical thinking abilities, increased learners' competence and confidence, quality learning experience as well as the integration of technology as an effective content delivery tool. As such, many higher learning institutions in Malaysia implemented blended learning because of its effectiveness as an alternative learning approach (Masrom et. all, 2008 and Bunyarit, 2006). It is also expected to overcome the issues brought about by the traditional classroom that practices the three-part pattern (Initiation/Response/Evaluation -IRE) (Dass, Normah, Arumugam & Dillah, 2014).

However, studies have shown that academicians are apprehensive about teaching in blended learning mode (Brooks, 2008). Bunyarit (2006), who evaluated the implementation of online mode in Universiti Tun Abd Razak (UNITAR) and Open University of Malaysia (OU) and blended learning mode in International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), concluded that there are factors which hinder academicians from facilitating courses in a blended learning environment. Pape (2010) mentioned in a study that there are students who still prefer the face-to-face approach where teacher guides them directly and are not very comfortable operating in this new learning environment called the blended learning. Chandra and Fisher (2009), revealed that students liked asking teacher questions face-to-face compared to posting them in the email.

Harris, Connolly & Feeney (2009) stressed that the perspectives of stakeholders such as organizations, instructors, and students are vital in ensuring the success of blended learning implementation. Among the perspectives, that of the students is the most vital. Park (2009) highlights the importance of conducting further research about student attitude towards blended learning.

Similarly, Baldwin-Evans (2006), posit the importance of determining learner readiness before implementing blended learning approach. An example of such a research is a case study by Muhammad Hasmi and Noorliza Karia (2005) to a group of distance education students, Universiti Sains Malaysia (SDE-USM) which identified four factors which are home computer, internet access, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness that lead to the readiness of e-learning.

Statement of Problem

At present there is a dearth of research on learners' readiness and perception. Therefore, this study is conducted with the aim to address the gap in knowledge pertaining to students' readiness and perception of blended learning. This paper examines issues regarding the use of blended learning as a delivery method at higher learning institution, specifically in UiTM Kedah. The discussion in this paper focuses on learners' readiness and perceptions of the blended learning environment.

Research Objectives

There are two research objectives of this paper:

1. to investigate students' perceptions towards Blended Learning.
2. to investigate students' readiness towards Blended Learning.

Research Questions

1. What are the students' perceptions towards Blended Learning?
2. Are the students ready to receive the Blended Learning approach?

Research Methodology

Participants

The participants consisted of 98 students selected at random from degree and diploma courses from the Faculty of Business Studies in UiTM Kedah, who on average were 21 years of age. Details of the Academic Level of the students can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Academic level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Diploma	46	46.9	46.9	46.9
	Degree	52	53.1	53.1	100.0
	Total	98	100.0	100.0	

46 students which takes up 46.9% of the total participants were in Part 3 of Diploma in Business Studies, the core English subject they were required to take in that semester was ELC 230 (Integrated Language Skills : Writing). The remaining 53.1 % or 52 participants were in Part 3 of Degree in Business Studies, the core English subject they were required to take was EWC 661 (English for Report Writing). They were selected on the basis that they had previous exposure for 2 semesters to the blended learning approach in the core subjects offered by their Faculty. They had their BL for 12 hours in a semester in their core subjects. Hence it was assumed that they knew the basics of the blended learning style, which allows both face to face interaction and on-line delivery. Thus, they were capable of providing a fair judgement on the blended learning curricula in terms of stating their perceptions and readiness towards this approach.

Instrument

The main instrument used in this study was adapted from the Al Quds Open University Learners' Attitude towards Blended Learning (Ibrahim, 2013).This questionnaire consists of 21 items, structured in the form of statements. 4-point Likert Scale was used to rate the items, in which 1 stands for strongly agree, 2 for agree, 3 for disagree, and 4 for strongly disagree. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: Section A examined students' perceptions towards blended learning with 10 items to measure their perceptions; section B had 11 randomly-ordered items which measured students' readiness for blended learning.

To test the reliability of the constructs, the Cronbach's Alpha was estimated, and the results for the first construct showed that the total Alpha was 0.82. This indicates that the modified version of the questionnaire enjoyed a good degree of reliability (refer Table 2). The second construct of the questionnaire showed the total Alpha of 0.791 which means it also has a good degree of reliability.

Table 2: Reliability test on Section A and B

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Section A	.829	10
Section B	0.791	11

Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed systematically with the assistance of a statistician. The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 20). Then the data were tabulated and coded after which they were computed and presented in the form of frequencies and percentages. The data analysis was descriptive as the data were quantitative in nature. A total of 21 items were distributed to participants in order to evaluate their perceptions and readiness towards Blended Learning.

Findings and Discussions

Based on the means of Section A which examined students' perceptions towards blended learning, degree students showed a higher mean (M=2.07, SD=0.36), and diploma showed a lower mean (M=1.89, SD=0.33). This indica ed that the degree students have a more positive perceptions towards blended learning compared to their diploma counterparts. As for Section B which measured students' readiness for blended learning, diploma students showed a slightly higher mean (M=2.16, SD=0.40) as compared to degree students (M=2.11, SD=0.37). This indicates that both diploma and degree students are more or less equally ready to practice blended learning in their lessons. Table 3 shows the profile of the mean results between the two groups of students.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation for students' perception and readiness

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
mean_a	Diploma	46	1.8935	.33757	.04977
	Degree	52	2.0731	.36948	.05124
mean_b	Diploma	46	2.1640	.40047	.05905
	Degree	52	2.1136	.37021	.05134

From Table 4, it can be concluded that there is no difference in the mean between both groups except in two situations, whereby there is a difference on the perception between diploma and degree students (p value = 0.014). This result indicates that diploma students have a better perception of blended learning than their degree counterparts.

Table 4: Independent Samples Test for Students perceptions and readiness

		Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Interval of the	
									Lower	Upper
mean_a	Equal variances assumed	.729	.395	-2.500	9 6	.014	-.17960	.07183	-.32218	-.03701
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.514	95.892	.014	-.17960	.07143	-.32139	-.03780
mean_b	Equal variances assumed	.122	.728	.647	9 6	.519	.05040	.07786	-.10416	.20496
	Equal variances not assumed			.644	92.241	.521	.05040	.07824	-.10500	.20579

Table 5 shows that there is a significant difference in the mean between students' readiness towards blended learning with their level of computer skills (p value = 0.000). The result shows that students with moderate and good computer skills are more ready for blended learning compared to those with excellent computer skills. Therefore, it can be inferred that students with lower skills in computer seems to be more ready to accept new things such as blended learning compared to those with excellent skills in computer.

Table 5: Multiple comparisons between students' readiness for blended learning with their level of computer skill

(I) Skill		Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Moderate	Good	.03886	.09504	1.000	-.1928	.2705
	Excellent	.67825*	.16801	.000	.2688	1.0877
Good	Moderate	-.03886	.09504	1.000	-.2705	.1928
	Excellent	.63939*	.15011	.000	.2736	1.0052
Excellent	Moderate	-.67825*	.16801	.000	-1.0877	-.2688
	Good	-.63939*	.15011	.000	-1.0052	-.2736

***. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.**

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings showed that basically students are ready to embrace blended learning. This may be due to the fact that they are the products of Generation Y who are overly exposed to technology in their everyday life since small.

The study also showed that students' skill of computer appears to be significant with their readiness towards blended learning. Students who claim as having lower skills in computer seems to be more ready to take up the challenge of learning new things and in this case, blended learning in comparison to those with excellent skills in computer. In this case, the learners who have lower computer skills find that they need to follow teacher's instructions to learn the material while their more apt counterparts find that their good knowledge of the computer enables them to access the learning materials even if they do not follow the teacher's instructions closely.

On the finding that diploma students are more keen on blended learning compared to their degree college mates. Diploma students have 4 hours of English lesson a week while the degree students have only 2 hours a week. This enables the diploma students not only sufficient time to complete their assignment but also the spare time to surf the internet and make exciting new discoveries, a luxury the degree students do not have.

Some of the students' suggestions to improve the blended learning exercise are that lecturer's limit the time alloted for completion of assignments so students remain focused on task, lecturers should ensure blended learning activities are challenging enough to engage students' interest and finaly, in order to motivate students, lecturers should not only design activites that are relevant to their subject but also enable students to see the relevance as important to their learning.

One limitation of this study is that the data was collected only from one faculty thus the result cannot be generalized for other students in other faculties. It is suggested that the research be done in a more diverse context with participants from various faculties. Interviews could also be done to triangulate the data and to gain more indepth explanation to students perception and readiness to blended learning.

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