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Blended Learning in ESL Courses: UiTM Students' Attitudes and Perceptions

Rosita Aminullah^{1*}, Roselina Musahar², Nadiah Yahyauddin³

^{1,2,3}Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pahang,
Kampus Jengka, 26400 Bandar Tun Razak Jengka, Pahang, Malaysia

Rosita@pahang.uitm.edu.my, Roselina@pahang.uitm.edu.my, Nadiah@pahang.uitm.edu.my

*Corresponding Author

Abstract: ESL courses were taught classroom-based for more than 30 years in UiTM. Recently, blended learning was introduced and was considered as an innovative method in the ESL teaching and learning. In relation to that, this pilot study examines the attitudes and perceptions of UiTM students to gauge their readiness in using blended learning in their ESL courses. The study was conducted using a set of questionnaires through sampling of convenience. The data collected was analyzed using SPSS 18.0 to provide indicators on the students' attitudes and perceptions that would indicate their readiness for blended learning. A structured interview was also conducted to study the students' perceptions on the current use of blended learning and to probe some of the problems that students might face in blended learning. The study revealed the attitudes and perceptions of most students were positive and that they were ready for blended learning. However, certain areas need to be improved so that the use of blended learning can be maximized in the teaching and learning of the ESL courses.

Keywords: Blended learning, ESL online, E-learning, Independent learning, Mobile learning

1. Introduction

Conventional classroom teaching and learning of ESL courses was the norm in UiTM before the introduction of blended learning. After the introduction, blended learning has become an important aspect in the teaching and learning of ESL courses in UiTM. Basically, blended learning integrates "online and face-to-face formats to create a more effective learning experience" (Brew, 2008). It is still a relatively new concept in UiTM, whereby students can answer online quizzes, post assignments, take part in class forums complete and interact with fellow students and lecturers. Apart from that students are required to complete their on-going assessments online using the official students' portal and specific websites. However, the general assumption is that UiTM students would automatically adapt to the learning tool in order to complete specific requirements of the courses that they have enrolled in. Based on personal observation it was found that UiTM ESL students' scores for online assessments through the official online learning portal were generally low. Therefore, this pilot study was aimed at investigating the attitudes and perceptions of UiTM ESL students in order to gauge their readiness towards the current use of the learning tool.

2. Literature Review

To keep abreast with the changing trends in education, higher learning institutions are constantly trying to find innovative ways in language teaching and learning. One of the innovative ways is blended learning, in which modern technologies are integrated into the teaching and learning processes, in the effort to overcome some of the limitations experienced in the conventional classroom environment (Wakefield et al., 2008). Harris et al. (2009) states that blended learning is a resource-effective methodology with the potential to support teaching and to

enrich student learning experience. This is further supported by Towndrow and Cheers (2003) who believe that “a mixture of teaching and learning methods will always be the most efficient manner in which to support student learning because only then it is possible to embrace all the activities of discussion, interaction, adaptation and reflection, which is essential for academic learning”. However, merely replicating the classroom experience in the online environment may not meet students’ needs and could result in an unexpected failure (Kilmurray, 2003). Up to now, a few studies have been conducted to explore students’ attitudes and perceptions towards blended learning. Therefore, more studies need to be carried out to assess students’ readiness to use this “novel teaching and learning approach” (Baldwin-Evans, 2006) as some students might not be able to cope with the new responsibility of taking initiative in their learning process (Vaughan, 2007). Furthermore, some students might experience difficulty in adjusting to the online course structure in addition to managing their time and maintaining self-motivation (Fong et al., 2005). Even though blended learning offers an alternative learning method, researchers have not concluded which learning method suits students the best or enables them to experience maximum benefits (Wakefield et al, 2008). Hence, it is essential to study students’ attitudes and perceptions to gauge their readiness for blended learning.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted using the survey method in order to explore students’ attitudes and perceptions towards blended learning. The questionnaire for the survey consists of 22 items and uses a three-point Likert scale with Agree, Undecided and Disagree (adapted from Kamsin, 2005). A set of 3 open-ended questions was also included. The participants involved in this study were diploma students from various faculties. A total of 110 participants answered the questionnaire which consists of four sections including the demographic section. The data was processed using *Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 18.0 for Windows*.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table 1. Students’ perceptions of their computer literacy and assess to computer

Computer literacy	Weak 4 3.6%	Good 70 63.6%	Very Good 32 29.1%	Excellent 3 2.7%
Home Computer	Yes 99 90.0%		No 11 10.0%	
Home net	Yes 89 80.9%		No 21 19.1%	
Location for e-learning	At Home 41 37.3%	At University 61 55.5%	At Internet Cafe 7 6.4%	

The findings in Table 1 show that a majority of 70 students (63.6%) have good computer literacy while 32 students (29.1%) are very good with computer and only 4 students (3.6%) are weak. Only 3 students (2.7%) claimed to have excellent computer literacy. Out of 110 students, 99 (90.0%) admitted to have a computer at home and 11 (10.0%) students did not. 89 students (80.9%) had access to internet while 21 (19.1%) did not. Most participants preferred to use blended learning in the campus (55.5%) while 41 participants (37.3%) preferred to use blended learning at home or internet café (6.4%).

Table 2. Students' perceptions of effects of blended learning on their development of English language skills

	A	%	UN	DA
			%	%
Reading	101		5	4
	91.8		4.5	3.6
Spelling	94		12	4
	85.5		10.9	3.6
Vocabulary	90		16	4
	81.8		14.5	3.6
Grammar	77		27	6
	70.0		5	5.4
Pronunciation	73		25	12
	66.4		22.7	10.9
Listening	70		27	13
	63.6		24.5	11.8
Writing	68		28	14
	61.8		25.5	12.7
Speaking	63		30	17
	57.3		27.2	15.5

Table 2 shows that the three highest rated language skills perceived to be improved through blended learning were reading (91.8%), spelling (85.5%) and vocabulary (81.8%). Next is grammar (70.0%), followed by pronunciation (66.4%) and listening (63.6%). The two lowest rated language skills are writing (61.8%) and speaking (57.3%).

Table 3. Students' perceptions regarding the advantages of blended learning

	A	%	UN	%	DA	%
More effective modes	90	81.8	14	12.7	6	5.5
Interesting & useful	84	76.4	18	16.4	7	6.4
Authentic materials	73	66.4	31	28.2	5	4.5
Self-paced learning	72	65.5	30	27.3	7	6.4

Effective use of time	71	64.5	28	25.5	11	10.0
Improve online confidence	65	59.1	35	31.8	10	9.1
More convenient	50	45.5	36	32.7	24	21.8
Improve communication	46	41.8	41	37.3	23	20.9

Based on Table 2, it was found that the highest rated advantage of blended learning were the effective modes of learning English offered by blended learning (81.8%), followed by the interesting nature it created and usefulness (76.4%). Next, blended learning offered students authentic materials (66.4%) and it also enabled them to study at their own pace and to make effective use of their time. 59.1% students perceived blended learning improved their online confidence. However, the findings showed that students were skeptical about the convenience of learning the English language and to improve their communication skills through blended learning.

Table 4. Students' perception of the limitations and problems of blended learning

	A	%	UN	%	DA	%
Slow internet connectivity	101	91.8	5	4.5	3	2.7
Technical problems faced	67	60.9	29	26.4	14	12.7
Social isolation	57	51.8	36	32.7	16	14.5
Difficult & frustrating	43	39.1	37	33.6	29	26.4
Preference for books	42	38.2	46	41.8	22	20.0
No computer access	22	20.0	27	24.5	61	55.5

Table 4 shows that 91.8% students perceived that slow internet connection was their major problem in using blended learning, followed by technical problems (60.9%). A total of 51.8% students feel socially isolated when using blended learning, while 14.5% felt comfortable working alone. 39.1% perceived blended learning to be difficult and frustrating. 20% of the students preferred blended learning while 42 students (38.2%) prefer textbook. 46 students (41.8%) were undecided. A majority of 61 students (55.5%) have access to computer, 27 students (24.5%) have limited access and sadly 22 students (20%) have no access to computer.

Table 5. Answers to open-ended questions regarding blended learning

Questions	Answers
1. What are the advantages of blended learning?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable me to learn at my own pace • Help me to improve language skills
2. What are the limitations of blended learning?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow or no internet connections • Technical problems, e.g. faulty internet browsers unable to submit online quizzes, inability to open online quizzes • Unable to communicate with the lecturer to ask questions pertaining to online quizzes
3. What are your suggestions concerning the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide high speed and free internet

improvement of blended learning at the university?

connection

- Improve the contents of online exercises
- Improve the efficiency of student portal

A majority of the students perceived that they have good computer literacy which is the basic requirement in using blended learning. However, there was still a small number who admitted being weak and needed help to achieve the required level of computer literacy. The weak computer literacy might be the results of not having computer and internet access at home or elsewhere. According to Schell and Phillips (2012), lack of technical skills is the first barrier to success in blended learning. Apart from that, it could also stem from students' lack of interest in using the computer and the internet. If these are the cases, they need to be more motivated to improve their computer literacy and to get better access to the computer. Most students preferred to use blended learning at the university and therefore, the university need to improve the facilities in order to provide more support to blended learning.

The study reveals that language skills can be improved through blended learning. However, most students perceived that language skills such as reading, spelling and vocabulary can be improved more than the others. Writing and speaking skills came last. Therefore, more exercises and language practices need to be offered in the courses using blended learning. They need to be more interesting and challenging to motivate student to learn all the language skills as maximum as possible. Using lot of authentic materials could help spark students' interest and motivation.

The Y generation seems to be attracted to different media such as prints, audio videos and animations. Apart from that they like to learn using authentic materials. These are the areas that course builders can look deeper into. In spite of that, a majority of the students perceived blended learning to be interesting and useful. At the same time blended learning offers the opportunity to study the English language at their own pace and at the same time improves their online confidence. However, due to certain constraints, students found that blended learning can be inconvenience, especially when they have little access to the computer and internet. They were skeptical about improving their communication skills due to the fact that blended learning is individual learning.

The study indicates that students perceived slow internet connection and technical problems faced may hamper the process of blended learning. A majority of the students did not favour the social isolation that comes with blended learning. This is because that they felt that they lacked friends' support and the opportunity to socialize when learning online. Some students perceived online learning as difficult and frustrating and preferred the more traditional method of learning from the textbooks. Besides that, some students felt that they lacked computer access to take part in blended learning. These findings are consistent with Alhawiti (2011), whose study observed that "poor technical, expertise and infrastructure are the major barriers" to blended learning.

The open ended questions revealed that students perceived blended learning as not only beneficial in improving language skills but also enables them to learn at their own pace. At the same time students perceived that slow or no internet connection hinder the learning process. Technical problems such as faulty internet browsers, the inability to submit online quizzes as well the inability to access the quizzes can further complicate the online learning. Apart from that students have difficulty communicating with their lecturers to solve these problems.

Among the suggestions given by the students to improve blended learning were the university needs to provide high speed and free internet connection. Apart from that course developers can improve the contents of online exercises and quizzes so that students are more motivated to learn English language through blended learning. The efficiency of student portal should also be improved to increase the convenience of using the online portal as a tool of learning.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Blended learning does has its strengths. When “appropriately” implemented, it can significantly improve the learning experience (Marsh, 2012). Curriculum makers need to provide more opportunities for students to use blended learning in ESL courses. Even though the study revealed that students are ready for ESL blended learning there are some areas that need attention and improvement such the required facilities and improving the contents of the ESL courses as well as providing motivation and tutorial to weaker students. In this way blended learning can be utilized as maximum as possible. At the same time more studies need to be carried out, especially that involve students who have undergone ESL courses using blended learning.

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