

Perceptions and Practices of Blended Learning in Foreign Language teaching at USIM

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Abstract

Teaching foreign languages for communication purposes is considered to be the priority in updating high education in Islamic Science University of Malaysia. The ability to communicate in other languages is becoming an integral part of professional competence of any specialist. In the frame of the limited class hours new methodological teaching approaches serve the purpose of recognizing commitment to lifelong learning. The popular motto of higher education nowadays is "to learn how to learn". So, in this way, autonomy can be considered as a necessary condition, in which a student uses endless potential of a human brain and modern technologies, including information ones, to attain knowledge faster, with higher efficiency and less effort. Traditional teaching methodology is no more serves this purpose. Foreign Language educators should implement new methodology to fulfill the needs of learning in new technology era. The Blended Learning is a special organization of learning, which allows combining classroom face-to-face techniques and online interactive collaboration. Blended learning can help educators to achieve several pedagogical goals: prepare students to produce the constructive and algorithmic thinking skills, help to improve teaching qualities and implement social order. The study conducted the end of year 2017, data collected from the participants who are teaching foreign languages in the faculty of Major Language studies, Islamic Science University of Malaysia. Through Open- end questionnaire and Interview as research instrument, researcher will find out the perception of blended learning among UISM foreign Language lecturers, the types of blended learning models have been using by USIM foreign language lectures in their daily teaching activities. Suggestions are going to be given for whose language educators who wish to take challenge to implement the blended learning in the future.

Keywords: Foreign Language Teaching, Blended Learning, Blended learning models

Introduction

The field of foreign language education has heavily relied upon an instructor-oriented lectures or passive practices and drill activities in classrooms over the years. Recently, with the introduction of technology into education, many foreign language courses have started to deliver self-study formatted web pages, and yet those pages' contents offers few interactions between instructors and peer learners. With new technology plays more and more important role in current teaching and learning, one of the new approach blended learning has been practiced and implemented by many high institutions all over the world. The blended learning approach is expected to reduce the limitation of each instructional environment and increase learning effectiveness by mixing the advantages of face-to-face instruction and online learning, and by mixing self-study and collaborative activities with different instructional technologies. Therefore, it is encouraging to see many instructors and educational practitioners beginning to consider using the blended learning approach to make their teaching and learning more meaningful.

Use of technology in education has become necessary, of its positive effects on the teaching and learning process. There is much attention paid to encourage students as well as lecturers engage in blended learning environment. Nowadays a lot of high educational institutions and companies use such technology. Through this method: student gets the opportunity to learn in a group (classroom) with a lecturer and additionally at home at a convenient time; student herself/himself sets the optimal speed and intensity of the learning process, this method helps student to discipline herself/himself and learn to work independently. Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM) has developed a learning system management for

academic use and to be utilised as the main medium of online communications between lecturers and students which is known as GOALS. University provides appropriate training sessions every semester for lecturers in how to use GOALS and apply all tools and activities in their daily teaching. Blended learning which is optional for faculty members at USIM. At this level, 30% of the course content is delivered online through GOALS. Due to the poor facilities of Faculty and other reasons, the blended learning model is not widely used by many lecturers in faculty, there are many of lecturers are still struggling with GOALS due to lack of ICT skills or did not attend the blended learning training provided by the university. The current study tries look at the perceptions and practices of blended learning in foreign language teaching at faculty major language studies in USIM. This study tries to answer the following research questions:

What are the blended learning models are been using by foreign language instructors?

What is the foreign language instructors' perception of blended learning in teaching?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Blended Learning and its definition

Blended learning is not new approach for effective teaching has been in use for more than 20 years (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, & Francis 2006, cited in Sharma, 2010, p.456). As Claypole (2003) has argued that "blended learning is not a new matter; it is indeed the logical development of previous attempts involving the mixing of methods of teaching." It was first used in the corporate world as a strategy to allow employees to continue in the workplace and study at the same time (Sharma, 2010), but it also emerged in the educational context as a result of: a) the accessibility of computer technology in and outside the classroom, b) the expansion of the pedagogical potential of ICT for teaching and learning (Hong & Samimy, 2010), and c) the disillusionment generated in online learning with the stand-alone adoption of online media (McDonald, 2008).

Driscoll (2002) identified four different concepts denoted by the term of blended learning:

Combining or mixing web-based technology to accomplish an educational goal;

Combining pedagogical approaches (e.g. constructivism, behaviorism, cognitivism) to produce an optional learning outcome with or without instructional technology;

Combining any form of instructional technology with face-to-face instructor-led training;

Combining instructional technology with actual job tasks (Hartoyo, 2012: 103).

Generally speaking blended learning is the integration of digital tools, techniques and materials with the physical classroom. In a blended course, students may view lectures, access readings, ask questions, and complete assignments online in virtual learning environments (VLE) like Moodle and through online classrooms, freeing up in-person class periods for discussions, activities and traditional lectures. Other terms, such as mixed, hybrid, or integrative learning, all describe the same method of teaching. blended learning is any formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace. Students do some of their learning via the Internet. It is a bigger instructional shift from a face-to-face teacher to web-based content and instruction.

Blended learning in foreign language teaching

There are many researches have been done on blended learning in foreign language teaching, researchers found out that the blended learning is not only benefit the learners in their language learning, but also language educators will benefit from it.

The advantages of blended learning for both educators as well as students are:

For educators blended learning offers access to global resources and materials that meet the students' level of knowledge and interest, help educators improved teaching conditions, it provides educators more opportunities for collaboration, meaningful professional development and of course to improve their time efficiency.

For students blended learning increases students' interest in their own learning process, enables students to learn at their own pace, and also prepare students for future because blended learning offers a multitude of real-world skills, that will help students directly translate their research skills, self-learning skills, self-engagement skills, sense of responsibility and of course computer literacy skills into life skills.

The most important aim of a blended learning design is thus to create a learning environment that combines the best of both models and that works as a whole and to find "the most effective and efficient combination of the two modes of learning for the individual learning subjects, contexts and objectives" (Neumeier, 2005.p. 165). Blended learning seeks to generate a coherent and harmonious balance between online access to knowledge and face-to-face human interaction by taking into account learners' and teachers' aptitudes and attitudes. Blended learning therefore remains an important concept in language teaching as "its overall focus is concerned with the attempt to identify the optimum mix of course delivery in order to provide the most effective language learning experience" (Sharma, 2010, p. 457).

Murday, Ushida and Chenoweth (2006, 2008) conducted a blended French language learning project at Carnegie Mellon University. Authors compared the effectiveness of the implemented blended learning format with that of traditional or conventional courses by examining students' learning outcomes as well as the level of satisfaction reported by instructors and learners through course evaluations, interviews, and focus groups. The authors found out that although the results suggest that the blended courses were successful and had an increasing level of satisfaction over time, however, there was not a significant statically difference between the scores learners obtained in the two courses; that is to say, students' learning in both contexts was similar.

The similar projects have been conducted by Banados (2006) at a university in Chile. Author explored the impact of implementation of a pilot an ESL blended program by looking learners' linguistic competence and their level of satisfaction. The study based on survey and end of term test found out that the students' oral competence improved significantly and there was also notable progress in all other skills as well.

Unlike other researchers, Comas-Quinn (2011) examined an introduction Spanish blended language learning course from language instructors' perspective at the Open University (UK). The study carried out through classroom observation, survey and an institutional report. The study found out that the unsatisfactory of language instructor of implementation of blended learning in language teaching.

Although there are many benefits of blended learning in language teaching and learning, however Sezen Tosun (2015) found something different in her study. Her study on " The effects of blended learning on EFL students' vocabulary enhancement" showed that although students were satisfied with the proposed blended learning strategy in teaching vocabulary but still prefer the traditional classroom based learning, they did not want to spend time studying new vocabulary items outside the classroom due to their lack of motivation. The students in this particular study do not have the self-discipline to make e-learning a powerful option which allows them to work independently at their own pace.

Methodology

3.1 participants

The study was carried out with a small scale 5 of Foreign Language instructors, who are currently teaching foreign languages in Faculty of Major Language Studies at Islamic Science University of Malaysia. There are 2 Japanese instructors, 2 Mandarin instructors and 1 French instructor participated in this study.

3.2. Data collection

In order to examine the participants' perception regarding blended teaching the questionnaires that adapted from Akkoyunlu & Soylu (2008) were used at the end of semester one 2017/2018 academic year. The questionnaires developed for the present study were slightly modified to fit the blended learning format of the institution and for the purpose of the study.

In order to find further in-depth analysis of participants' views, semi-structured interviews were conducted for instructors. Research questions were prepared in English.

The investigation was carried out in three stages. The first stage was completed before the actual delivery of the blended learning courses. The purpose of the first stage was to collect data about the instructors' general experience in the use of ICT and GOALS (Learning management system) in teaching processes. At this stage data was obtained using a short open-end questionnaire. The second and the third stages were completed after the delivery of the courses, interview was prepared for the second stage in order to investigate the perception towards blended teaching activities they implemented in their daily teaching; At the third stage the method of a loosely structured informal interview was applied for a more in-depth discussion of the language instructors' experience and opinion regard to the blended teaching. During the semester break, all foreign language instructors were invited to have interviews regarding their views about the blended learning environment in the faculty.

Results and Discussion

4.1. R.Q1. What the blended learning models are been using by Foreign Language instructors?

Based on the questionnaire have been collected showed that foreign language instructors in USIM try to use multiple approaches to meet the needs of learners with different personality types and different learning styles. The top three blended learning models they currently using in their daily teaching are: **Blended face-to-face class**, **Blended online class** and **the flipped classroom**. A major benefit of multiple modalities as mentioned by Picciano (2009) "they allow students to experience learning in ways in which they are most comfortable while also challenging them to experience and learn in other ways as well" (p.16).

According the foreign language instructor's opinion mentioned the reasons of blended learning model have been chosen in their daily teaching are the beginner level students can find the video tasks, with the recordings of native language speaker, which is quite encouraging for their own communicative production. For the more advanced students, the blended learning present an opportunity to drill their communicative skills in forums and chats of the virtual environment of the courses. In the virtual environment, as highlighted by the instructors, communicative competence can be developed in the form of a written production in forums and in the form of an oral production in chats. The view supports Blake's (2008) study, who presents an overview of empirical research into online language learning, online and blended language learners show better results of written production and communication than their counterparts in traditional classrooms.

As for the practicality, an instructor has mentioned that:

"Our students can access the course with all its versatile materials like video recordings by native speakers, grammar and vocabulary banks at any time and place where he or she has access to a computer and the internet...."

"Students have a convenient access to a lecturer's consultation or a discussion of a difficult issue with their peer in a virtual forum in GOALS....."

As can be noticed, research on the implementation of blended models has yielded different results. Some researchers contend that language learning is enhanced through the exposure learners have to the blended learning model, while others indicate that there is not significant improvement in comparison with more conventional (F2F) means of instruction. In terms of levels of satisfaction, different opinions have also been reported. One of the most significant aspects noted in the studies, however, is the need instructors to learn to adapt to studying/teaching online. Although Blended learning implies the combination of both face-to-face and online instruction, the implementation of the online component is the one which seems to cause more difficulties for instructors in that it implies a change in roles and the acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

According to Comas-Quinn (2011) the success of any model lies especially in the hands of teachers, and in the case of blended learning, on how well they can make the transition from their role in the face-to-face classroom to the complex roles that online learning demands: "The success of any innovation in education, such as the introduction of online teaching and online technologies (what is commonly referred to as e-learning), is in great part due to how well teachers deal with the new ideas and implement them with their learners" (p.219). Teachers' understanding and use of ICT modes greatly impact students' acceptance of online learning as well as their perceptions of how useful online tools are.

4.2. R.Q2. What is the foreign language instructors' perception of blended learning in teaching?

The instructors indicated during the interviews that they were mostly happy with the idea of blended learning, and they also believe that blended learning has positive effect on students' learning.

Findings revealed both positive comments and criticism. The convenience of access, the learner-centered approach and the communicative practice that the blended courses generated were valued positively by foreign language instructors as learners were able to work consistently and independently. The following extracts from the interviews with instructors reflect their ideas related to their perception of blended learning.

As for the practicality, two instructors expressed their opinions about how blended instruction made learning easier for students as follows:

"It is a platform worth trying. It has more advantages than disadvantages. It allows teachers to monitor their students' progress more closely than traditional methods. This way of learning is also very practical, and students can assess it anytime and anywhere. (...) I think blended learning boosted my students' interest and engagement."

"I think technology always makes learning easy. Today with this practicality, one can learn a language in a very short time."

However, instructors also expressed the negative comments on blended learning in their daily teaching as following:

"Instructors cannot be moved away from face-to-face teaching to online teaching completely as there were students who always needed more assistance and guidance with their tasks."

"at beginning level, face-to-face teaching is more effective, because students only interact with their instructors in class time, if they need any assistance from the instructors regarding to their language learning rather than interact online....."

"Not everybody is expert in technology. Its depends on instructors convenience to choose what type of teaching model they would like to implement into the classroom, in order to make class more interesting and attractive instructor should to learn to use new approach of teaching. Blended learning could be one of the ways....."

Lack of motivation of students in participating in virtual forums and online learning is another negative comment given by the instructors. one of the instructor has mentioned in the interview:

"My students are not motivated in online forum and online chatting with their peers and instructors. Students are using internet more for leisure activities or social media rather than for study activities."

"Students are not interested in online learning or like to participate in online forum discussions....."

Based on the views from the instructors, study found that instructors valued those aspects of blended learning which were related to students' autonomous learning, while those aspects of blended learning which focused on the input of the instructor were regarded as questionable.

The findings showed that while acclaiming the factor of independence and autonomy in blended learning, the instructors still prefer the traditional face-to-face interaction for a teacher-learner contact. On the other hand, the instructors might feel [a] lack of competence and experience in e-communication and therefore be rather unsure about the usefulness of this form of contact with their students. Such comments of the instructors can be seen as reflecting the fact that the application of blended learning does not have a long tradition in language teaching/ learning and instructors might be not very experienced in involving their students in interesting and creative activities to attract students to control over their own learnings.

4.4. Suggestions for Improvement

Since the language is a variable value, it requires compulsory element of "live communication", therefore it is impossible replace language instructors in classroom teaching by ICT completely. Foreign language instructors who would like to take challenges in implementing the blended learning in their daily teaching should prepare the following tasks:

Prepare well-organized teaching material. Language instructors should be aware the suitable materials he/she needs to prepare for classroom teaching and online teaching. Plan the times they need to explain and work on the materials during face-to-face classroom teaching and for students' independent learning online to help different capabilities of students to develop various skills they need in future use .

Prepare the well-organized teaching method in the classroom activities and online education. Monitoring students' self-checking learning process.

Language instructors need to prepare motivated teaching and learning activities that can be maintained throughout the whole learning process. Instructors should stimulate self-control, encourage and develop various ways of productive cooperation with the students.

Language instructors should be motivated to self-education in the work with students. Instructors should not be afraid to do some changes from use only papers and out-of-date tape recordings, chalk and board to new digital technology that is new trend in modern education.

5. Conclusion

The present study showed that the foreign language instructors at Islamic Science University of Malaysia displayed a generally positive perception towards blended learning. Moreover, the instructors are appreciative with regard to different forms of blending ICT into foreign language classes as for instance classes in the multimedia language teaching, the introduction of interactive tests and online learning. Nevertheless, the instructors maintain that the improvement of their personal proficiency in computer skills and the application of ICT are necessary to guarantee the effectiveness and productiveness of blended teaching/ learning. The blended learning is still in development stage in faculty of major language studies in USIM, it needs more research and development that address types of BL from different aspects such as effective infrastructure and training of both instructors and learners with efficient skills in teaching and learning. It can also be related to the fact that the young generations of students embrace technological progress more naturally than most of the instructors. Instructors showed their willingness of eager participant the blended leaning training courses offered by the University to improve their general skills to benefits both instructors and students. Regard to the potentials of blended learning in the field of foreign language education, pedagogically innovative approaches and instructional designs for meaningful foreign language education are encouraged as a follow-up of this study.

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