

Investigating English Language Learners' Experience in Using a Learning Management System in a Blended Learning Setting

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Badrul Hisham Ahmad^{1,*}, Aznoora Osman², Nadia Abdul Wahab³, Ina Suryani⁴

¹ Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 02600 Arau, Perlis, Malaysia

² Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 02600 Arau, Perlis, Malaysia

³ Centre for International Languages, Universiti Malaysia Perlis, 02600 Pauh, Perlis, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to learn more about the learners' feedback on their experience with the university's learning management system in their English Language learning. The objectives of this study were to investigate a) the learners' feedback on their blended learning experience during their language learning, b) the learners' experience in carrying out Grammar Practices and c) the learners' experience in carrying out Vocabulary Practices via an LMS. The study investigated 68 English Language learners of a public university in Malaysia attending Level 1 English proficiency course. A set of questionnaire containing 38 items using 4-points Likert-type scale was administered to measure their general blended learning experience as well as their LMS experience for their Grammar and Vocabulary learning. The study found that learners perceived their blended learning experience with LMS as well as their Grammar and Vocabulary learning experience via an LMS a positive experience. Learners also showed a favourable support for future application of LMS in the English Learning.

Keywords:

Learning management system, blended learning, english language learning

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1. Introduction

The creation of worldwide web and information and communication technology has brought about the online learning mode available to all interested parties. Initially, Singh & Reed [1] proposes that online learning modes were mostly employed in a business setting focussing on training and development. Later, the approach has been widely accepted and has become very popular in the higher learning settings. This is evident from the intensity of the changes that have taken place within institutions of higher learning particularly Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions all over the world catering for adult learners.

Since then, distance delivery has gradually become part of campus based teaching and is commonly termed as blended learning (BL). Graham [2] states that blended learning (BL) integrates traditional face-to-face (f2F) classroom and computer mediated elements or online learning modes. This general definition has been echoed by many other scholars too [3-5]. And, one common thing

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: badrulhisham@perlis.uitm.edu.my (Badrul Hisham Ahmad)

present in a BL environment is a learning management system (LMS) to enable the implementation of BL.

Mohamad [6] in his keynote address at UiTM Academic Conference 2017 focussing on redesigning higher education stresses on one crucial factor in ensuring successful education which is the understanding of the mind sets of the learners when designing a blended learning approach to teaching and learning. This is to ensure the system to be developed caters to learners' need as well as their interests. Zulfa and Yuniasih [7] states that through the engagement of technology such a learning management system, BL offers innovated teaching options for English lessons because BL offers new learning experience for the learners and promote their continuous engagement and interaction with the lesson.

Hence, gathering learners' feedback or learners' satisfaction is crucial for higher education institutions in order to help them identify the quality of their teaching and learning by investigating their method's strengths and weaknesses and finding areas that may need further improvement as discovered by several studies [8-9].

1.1 Problem Statement

Theoretically, when learning happens in a distance, we have to enable teachers and learners to communicate with each other or to empower students to carry out learning in real time (synchronous) and delayed time (asynchronous) using the right technology. This means that learners can access education and learning opportunities at any time, place, and pace to suit their individual lifestyles, learning preferences and personal development plans. Such condition, according to Idrus and Habibah [10], optimizes the applications of various technological innovations available for the educators. It is therefore crucial for BL providers to ensure LEP learners are not shortchanged when BL is implemented in the teaching of English proficiency courses.

A Learning Management System (LMS) has been part of a blended learning setting.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

- 1) to investigate English Language learners' feedback on their blended learning using an LMS,
- 2) to investigate English Language learners' feedback on their Grammar Practice experience,
- 3) to investigate English Language learners' feedback on their Vocabulary experience, and
- 4) to identify their feedback on the future use of LMS in language learning.

1.3 Research Questions

The research questions of this research are:

1. How do English Language learners value their LMS experience?
2. How do English Language learners value their Grammar Practice experience?
3. How do English Language learners value their Vocabulary Practice experience?
4. What is the learners' view regarding the future of LMS in English Language learning in their university?

1.4 Significance of Study

Since higher learning institutions have taken enormous efforts to materialise the Global Online Learning, this study focussing on English learners' point of view and experiences of Blended Learning in a Higher Education (HE) setting is deemed important for several reasons. First, although a lot of studies have been carried out on BL, there have not been many major studies that have sought the voices of the learners and their perspectives on their BL experience when enrolling in an English proficiency course. For this reason, this study sought to explore and offer a preliminary understanding of the English learners' perceptions of their experiences of BL in the Malaysian public universities. This preliminary study will try to understand these young undergraduates' perception of their own BL practice when enrolling in an English proficiency course.

Secondly, the findings of this study will allow the HE institutions in Malaysia to learn about the students' experiences and make future improvements and adjustments to provide these English proficiency course learners an appropriate BL experience which will also help to strengthen e-learning initiatives in the country. This study will provide insights in ensuring the success of their future students who possess different levels of proficiency.

Finally, this study is significant in addressing how the universities particularly, administrators, faculty members and educators could organise BL courses and programmes, and educational activities to meet with the various and demanding needs of the learners. Ultimately, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how these English proficiency learners perceive their BL experience.

Hence, this study is deemed crucial to ensure the learners' viewpoints and thoughts are taken into consideration and attended to.

2. Literature Review

September 2014 marks the first involvement of public universities in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). This is due the Ministry of Higher Education's [11] focus on Global Online Learning. Global Online Learning is one of the 10 shifts outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 for higher education. Hence, Blended Learning (BL) approach, though many institutions have employed such method much earlier on their own initiatives, will be taken as an integral part of the campus based teaching in catering for the adolescent learners in Malaysian Higher Education System. Public and private higher education (HE) institutions in Malaysia currently are on BL mode. However, can they provide the best learning experience to their students especially when the students possess different language proficiency levels. Are they coping well with their English language learning?

2.1 Global Online Learning

Mohamad [1] stressed the need to understand the mind sets of the learners. In other words, recognising their strengths and weaknesses is the first step to designing effective educational programmes. Since the current generation are well-connected to the technology, it is best that ICT becomes part of their learning medium.

Hence, institutions have to also ensure that their learners are supportive of such choice of learning medium. Mehran *et al.*, [12] discovered that some students do not perceive BL method as a favourable medium. In their study of students' e-readiness, students have noted that out of 299

participants, only 32.4% of them indicated a favourable stand in enrolling in a blended English course. 34.4% of the respondents were doubtful and 32.1% were reluctant to such proposition.

It is undeniably true that computer mediated blended learning is being employed by all higher learning institutions but changes and modifications of such approach are vital in ensuring its successful implementation.

Mohamad [13] suggested that another important point to consider in ensuring successful BL or any online learning practice is the reasonable turnaround time in the communication between the learners and teachers. When online communication takes place, there need to be a fast turnaround time between the two parties to ensure learners' queries and misunderstandings can be resolved swiftly.

2.1.1 Positive aspects of an LMS

First, Zulfa and Yuniasih [7] have concurred that BL offers innovated teaching options for English lessons because BL offers new learning experience for the learners, improving their active participations, improving their exam grades and promoting their engagement and interaction with the lesson which are achievable through an LMS. BL approach to language learning particularly vocabulary, according to Hajebi et. al [14] has been found to be helpful in improving learners' vocabulary mastery and sometimes, according to Djiwandono [15], both the vocabulary and their reading comprehension abilities. Furthermore, Grady [16] discovered online lessons and revisions not only help learners strengthen their retention of their new vocabulary but also their grammar.

Besides that, with the utilisation of technology, according to Spanjers *et al.*, [17], blended learning has become a more effective approach for it has increased access to learning and has resulted in better resource management. This positive development is achievable through the LMS. Learners could benefit from learning in different learning styles since BL include face-to-face and LMS.

In addition, autonomous learning advocated through LMS allows learners to maximise their potentials. Jee and Gabriele [18], who investigated highly motivated second language adult learners' performance in a BL environment, re-affirm that learners those who access synchronous language instruction together with self-study has indicated a more preferable response to their BL experience. Thus, autonomous learning does bring favourable impact onto the learners. Online quizzes and assessments administered through the LMS have been found to be very helpful in various learning settings by several authors [17-19].

2.1.1 Possible issues on an LMS

First and foremost, Lim, *et al.*, [20] stressed that selecting the blended learning approach to English proficiency course has definitely raised the stake on and challenge in achieving successful language learning. Including LMS in such practice may provide another set of challenges to these learners who are still unfamiliar with such approach. LMS can be considered as a new experience to these fresh school leavers since this would be their first experience with LMS. So, any consideration for ICT incorporation into language learning must be thoroughly considered to avoid any complications to the learners.

Technology like LMS also presents unnecessary challenges to English Language learners. A study by Gyamfi [21] learned that unlike the traditionally face-to-face language learning setting, learning can be difficult when human interaction and support have been reduced due to the increased time with the technology.

Furthermore, through the implementation ICT like LMS, one cannot deny the possible increase in the number of manipulation, cheating and/or plagiarism as suggested by some authors [22-23]. When learners are given the freedom to carry out asynchronous tasks at their own chosen time, one cannot deny the possibilities of cheating and manipulations like asking other people to complete the task for them. Hence, the objective for assigning the task is not met.

Another aspect of great concern is the availability of immediate feedback to the learners. Dzakiria *et al.*, [24] stressed that although BL promotes autonomy in their learning whereby learners can sometimes decide when they work best to complete the given tasks, the implementation of an LMS may present learners delayed feedback to some of their learning tasks unlike the immediate feedback available in traditional f2f learning. Hence, Grady [16] highlighted the fact that BL teachers might have to spend more time to make them available online to assist their students in coping with some of their given tasks.

In addition, Sayed and Fariz [25] have included poor language skills in the list of general barriers or challenges to blended learning success. Having poor command of the English language may present learners with some challenges particularly when dealing with LMS whereby teachers are absent from the setting to assist them in understanding the tasks at hand. Thus, any approach to be taken during language learning should not create unnecessary stress to learners who come from a variety of linguistics background.

3. Methodology

68 respondents were involved in the study. They were selected on a convenience sampling. They were the first level English proficiency course learners. The English proficiency course investigated is the compulsory proficiency course for first year students of the institution. It incorporates blended learning approach which supplements face to face classroom sessions with additional activities conducted through the university's LMS. Besides learning activities, the LMS also supplements learners with non-graded online practice like Grammar and graded online Practice for Vocabulary.

3.1 Instrument

A questionnaire was utilised for data collection purposes. It was an adapted questionnaire from Thang *et al.*, [26]. A 4 point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree"(1) to "Strongly Agree" (4), was employed to ensure learners indicate their stance on the issue. A 5 point Likert scale may encourage respondents to take a neutral stance thus resulting in a moderate response to all items and influence a study's findings as suggested by Gyamfi [21].

4. Results and Discussion

Overall, learners indicated a favourable response to the use of LMS in their blended English Language learning. Most importantly, 92.6% of the participants indicated that the activities inclusive of the ones on LMS fulfilled their needs in their English Language learning while only 7.4% stated otherwise. Furthermore, 91.2% of the respondents agreed that the activities including the ones carried out through the LMS help with their confidence in using the English Language while 8.8% disagreed.

In addition, 80.9% of the respondents stated that they supported the idea that activities conducted through the LMS should be continued for the following semesters.

4.2 Grammar Practice via LMS

Generally, these English Language learners expressed a positive feedback towards their LMS experience in completing the Grammar practices. The finding shows that the majority, 94.1% of the respondents, admitted that completing Grammar Practice was easy with the help of their friends while only 5.9% disagreed. In addition, 89.7% of the respondents approved the role of Grammar Practice on the LMS in reinforcing their English Language learning while 10.3% indicated otherwise. Next, 88.2% of the respondents acknowledged that the online Grammar Practice helped improved their Grammar while 11.8% said otherwise. Furthermore, when investigating whether the Grammar Practice on the LMS was user friendly or not, 85.3% of the respondents agreed with the statement while the remaining 14.7% disagreed.

Then, almost 81% of the respondents admitted that, through LMS, they could decide their own time to complete the given Grammar Practices. Nevertheless, an interesting result to note is the high percentage of students, 64.7%, that indicated that they rarely do their Grammar Practice after their class while only 35.3% did their Grammar Practice soon after their class. Lastly, although 76.5% of the participants indicated that they managed to complete task without any problem, almost a quarter or 24.5% of the respondent faced some complications in completing the tasks.

4.3 Vocabulary Practice via LMS

First of all, 92.6% of the respondents agreed that the Vocabulary Practice on the LMS was user friendly while the remaining 7.4% disagreed. Besides that, 92.5% of the participants expressed their positive feeling in receiving their online practice score immediately after the task completion while 7.5% stated the opposite. As for the online vocabulary practice, 91% of the respondents found that such practice has helped improve their vocabulary knowledge while only 9% stated otherwise. Through LMS, 86.6% of the respondents acknowledged that they could monitor their own progress and 82% of the participants agreed they could complete the tasks at their own pace. Unfortunately, 82.1% of the respondents pointed out that they discussed the answers with their friends when completing the practices while only 17.9% pointed out the opposite. 77.6% of the respondents also agree that they shared answers between them in order to get full score in the graded practices.

The results of this study points out a generally positive perceptions towards ones' blended learning experience in learning the English Language. The blended learning activities managed via an LMS met their needs in their English Language learning and helped with their confidence in using the English Language.

Their LMS experience in completing the Grammar practices reinforces their English Language learning and helps improve their Grammar especially when the LMS is user friendly. The learners have also managed to complete task with few complications. There are however some concerns too. Although they could decide their own autonomous learning time to complete the given Grammar Practices, this allow them to be irresponsible and negligent with their learning particularly when getting help from their friends in completing the tasks and when a high number of learners who do not try to complete their Grammar Practice immediately after their class.

As for their Vocabulary Practices, the LMS is user friendly and the practices have helped improve their vocabulary. Besides appreciating the immediate online practice score released once the task is completed, the utilisation of LMS allows the learners to decide when to complete the task as well monitoring their own achievements. Unfortunately, when they have decided to discuss the answers

with their friends when doing the practice, this reflects an unethical practice on their part despite arguing that such malpractice happens because they aim to achieve the highest possible score ever.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate English Language learners' feedback on their experience with a university's LMS in general as well as their Grammar and Vocabulary practices. Overall, the results have indicated that the learners have a positive feedback towards their LMS experience in their English Language learning. The study concludes that:

1. English Language learners have a favourable opinion towards the use of LMS in their learning.
2. English Language learners have a positive feedback towards their Grammar Practice experience.
3. English Language learners have a positive feedback towards their Vocabulary Practice experience.
4. Learners support future English Language learning through LMS.

The LMS employed to administer online quizzes and assessments has been found to be very well accepted and helpful in various blended learning settings that include English Language learning. BL through an LMS has been found to garner favourable response from the learners during their Grammar and Vocabulary practices, as echoed by Grady [16]. Hajebi [14] has also concluded that vocabulary enrichment activities conducted through ICT assisted learning or web based learning (WBL) model is welcomed by language learners to ensure their learning objectives are met. Read and his co-researchers [27] acknowledged that numerous researchers have been putting extraneous effort continuously to study ways to effectively handle the complexity in teaching and learning of vocabulary, and with the advancement of ICT, many encouraging feedbacks are hard to be unnoticed. Nevertheless, one of the greater challenges of BL is ensuring that students are responsible for their own learning as suggested by Kenney and Newcombe [28]. Administrators and teachers need to monitor their students' progress closely so that students could cope with the demand of being responsible for their own learning and having to manage their own asynchronous learning time responsibly. Continuous effort in creating awareness regarding ethical practices during their autonomous learning should also be considered.

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