ESL Classroom Reading Lessons: Online VS Blended

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Learning for students of the 21st century revolves highly around the advanced technology accessible in their educational activities. Therefore, language teachers need to be ready with a range of teaching materials, especially those that access technology, particularly computer assisted language learning. This study investigates English as a Second Language (ESL) Diploma students' preferences and performance in learning in reading lessons that comprise of online learning in comparison to blended learning methods in Malaysia. The study involved Diploma students from UiTM (University of Mara Technology) Cawangan Johor, Segamat campus. The data will be collected by using the mixed-method sequential explanatory study involved a quasi-experimental; pre-test and post-test design, and a semi-structured interview procedure. The quantitative data will be analysed by using the t-test procedure for the statistical results, while the qualitative data will be analysed by using thematic analysis. Based on the literature review, it is expected that the students may prefer to have reading lessons through blended learning rather than merely online learning. Further, the students are expected to perform better in answering reading questions after having blended learning reading lessons compared to merely online learning.

Key words: *ESL Classroom, Reading Lessons, Online Learning, Blended Learning, Students' Performance.*

Introduction

The advancement in network and communication technologies has brought prominent change in the education system. The issues between face-to face instruction and online instruction used to involve fiery debate topics about the growth of educational technology. Some parties are too loyal to the traditional instruction as they believe the presence of the teacher is the key component for student success, while others are celebrating the opportunities offered by the new technologies when engaged in classroom instructions. However, 21st century education has seen the debate shift to focus on the relative merits of online versus blended learning.

Problem Statement

In a world where technology has become the main resource for almost every element of life, teachers who only use traditional classroom instructions seem out of sync. Technology in education has been helping the sector to shine, yet the important role of teachers has been forgotten. Even though online learning offers a lot of advantages, there are also a few drawbacks that must be pondered. The use of only online learning in the teaching and learning process reduces the chances of students' understanding in a reading lesson. As elaborated by Tayebinik and Puteh (2013), blended learning activities can enhance students' understanding as the online instructions are combined with the significant effect of face-to-face communication process such as body language, tone of voice, facial expressions and eye contact.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study are:
1) Is there any difference in ESL students' performance when learning through online learning and blended learning evidenced when answering reading questions?
2) Do students prefer online learning or blended learning for reading lessons?

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are:
1) To identify whether there is a difference in ESL students' performance when learning through online learning and blended learning in answering reading questions.
2) To identify ESL students' preferences for reading lessons (online learning or blended learning).

Literature Review
Definition of Reading Lessons

Reading has become a basic need just like food and shelter not only in education institutions but because it also enables people to function accordingly in a society. For instance, in understanding instructions on medical prescriptions, applying for jobs, reading signage, composing and giving feedback using emails and even in following a map (Wong, 2016; Talley, 2017). According to Roit (2018), amazing readers do not have difficulty in fluency and achieve it effortlessly. For example, they can identify the reference words used and also the links found in their reading materials in seconds. She further added that, this type of reader has ability beyond reading alphabets, their skills in making meaning and learning through the values makes them idolised by others.

Talley (2017) highlighted that being proficient in reading is one of the key success criteria for students as it helps them in developmental accomplishments, for instance, attention, memory, language and motivation. Nevertheless, reading has to be strategic in order to go in depth through its meaning and that requires the combination of understanding the content and developing specific reading strategies from various types of texts (Roit, 2018). According to Nurmadia and Mardiana (2017), teachers think that students learn reading through osmosis or known as absorption autonomously. The researchers defined osmosis approach as teaching reading comprehension using the target language almost all the time in order with the hope of reaching a great outcome. Alfallaj (2017) further added that the basic support of second and foreign language learning is reading. This comprises all related reading components such as vocabulary enrichment, grammar skills and computer assisted language learning. As accentuated by Brown (1978), students have the ability to apply certain appropriate reading strategies required for a reading text as long as they are conscious of the reading process. This suggests students might have their own strategies in dealing with reading lessons, be it online or blended.

Online learning

The issue of integrating modern information and communication technologies for the purpose of teaching pedagogy at the tertiary level is undeniably crucial (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014). This is supported by Sun and Chen (2016) when they make it clear that the arrival of the World-Wide Web (WWW) in 1991 was a change agent in bridging the educational gap, and it is definitely a milestone in the transition of traditional learning to online-based education. Online learning can be interpreted as the integration of a wide range of programmes with the help of the Internet and the teaching and learning materials are expected to spark the interactions between teachers and students (Bakia, Shear, Toyama & Lasseter, 2012). They further explained that a lot of educational institutions are gearing towards online learning since it is cost effective and very beneficial for students specifically to prepare them for future education.

Blended Learning

Blended learning is not a remote term as it actually pre-dates the advent of digital technology according to Bryan and Volchenkova (2016). Unlike online learning which only involves 'self-learning and Internet', blended learning needs to incorporate face-to-face interaction in the classroom along with the use of ICT which is available simultaneously offline and online as described by Lalima & Dangwal (2017) and Wonyra (2018). Bliuc, Goodyear and Ellis (2007) further elaborate that, blended learning is when the traditional teaching and learning method is supported by online teaching and learning materials through a learning management system (LMS). To illustrate, if a class has to complete 10 contact hours per week, the face-to-face meeting can be reduced to 6 hours per week, while the remaining 4 hours can be completed via virtual meeting through the net.

The definition of blended learning also caught the attention of Delialioglu and Yildirim (2007) and Gulbahar and Madran (2009) who believed that blended learning can be categorised as hybrid instruction that associates internet related materials and traditional classroom methods as a teaching and learning strategy. Despite its deficiencies, classroom learning offers affective, cognitive and psychomotor values needed by students as these are what mould them to be humane (Lalima & Dangwal, 2017).

Grgurović (2011) defines the two classrooms 'locations' as the face-to-face method of teaching and learning which takes place in the normal classroom and computer assisted teaching and learning which is conducted either in the computer labs or in the students' own space. Therefore, teachers need to be ready with materials for both traditional and online lessons. This type of teaching pedagogy does not only help to close the gap in terms of space but also provides an enjoyable platform for students to learn independently as they are given the power to control the path and the pace of learning (Bryan & Volchenkova 2016; Kseniya, 2016). However, it cannot be denied that the effectiveness of a blended learning programme revolves highly around an institution's educational syllabus, facilities, and learning objectives (Moskal, Dziuban & Hartman, 2013).

Significance of the study

This study highlights the importance of classroom instructions to be maintained while injecting the advanced technological elements in ESL education, especially reading lessons. Azizan (2010), states that a classroom instructional (teaching and learning) method should include online teaching and learning methodology as this enhances availability of resources for the teachers and students. The enormous volume of available resources undoubtedly can lead the students to be more confident and competent, as well as enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.

Uniqueness of the study

There are a lot of previous literature that discusses the issues of online and blended learning in the context of language education. However, it is hard to find a study where reading lessons become the hero of the teaching. In addition, this study investigates through comparison, ESL student performance in answering reading questions after experiencing both online learning and blended learning processes.

Hence, the following set of hypotheses can be advanced:

H_0 : There is no significant difference between ESL students' performance when learning through online learning and blended learning in answering reading questions.

H_1 : There is a significant difference between ESL students' performance when learning through online learning and blended learning in answering reading questions.

Methodology

This chapter highlights the research design, research method, sample and data collection procedure of the study.

Research Design

The study used the mixed-method sequential explanatory study approach in which two sets of data were collected. For this study, students' results from pre and post tests were recorded which involved quasi-experimental design. The design of the study is quantitative and qualitative in nature as the latter would explain the former. The study made use of these designs as an investigation of potential improvement of the researchers' understanding towards the subject matter. As stated by Sandelowski (2000), the increasing number of researchers using the mixed-method techniques was influenced by the fact that this method helps to expand the scope of and deepen their understanding of their research study.

Research Method
Sample

The samples for this study were 30 Diploma students from UiTM Johor Malaysia who were learning English as their second language (ESL students). During the period of the study, the second semester students were taking the ELC151 course: Integrated Language Skills (Reading). In this course, they were exposed to various reading skills which required them to understand and practise the theories that they learnt whenever they were doing their reading. This course also incorporated blended learning in the lessons.

Sample Selection

A purposive sampling method was applied in selecting the student participants from one academic English class. They were around the age of 18 to 20 years old. These 30 students were selected as they had the background of learning English as a second language and were undergoing the ELC151 course. Since this study involved the reading skills of English, these students were intentionally selected.

Research Procedures

The quantitative data in this study was collected by using a quasi-experimental design which involved pre-test and post-test. The pre-test and post-test comprised of 20 reading questions that were answered by all student participants. The data was then analysed by running the paired t-test using the SPSS application to seek the significant statistical difference. To complement the data from the first research instrument, semi-structured interview sessions were carried out. The students were questioned on their preferences and confidence in having reading lessons through only online learning or through blended learning. The data obtained were then recorded and manually transcribed to be analysed by using thematic analysis to seek any recurring themes.

Results and Discussion

This section highlights the results of the study based on the research questions. The research questions were:

1) Is there any difference in ESL students' performance when learning through online learning and blended learning when answering reading questions?
2) Do students prefer online learning or blended learning for reading lessons?

RQ1: *Is there any difference in ESL students' performance when learning through online learning and blended learning when answering reading questions?*

A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare the students' pre-test and post-test results. Based on the analysis, it was found that there was a significant difference in the scores for pre-test (M=0.66, SD=0.22) and post-test (M=0.77, SD=0.18) conditions; t (19)= (-3.22), p=0.004. The results are displayed in the tables below.

Table 1: Paired Samples Statistics.

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	PRETEST	.656670	20	.2237662	.0500356
	POSTTEST	.772	20	.1778	.0398

Table 2: Paired Samples Statistics.

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	PRETEST - POSTTEST	-.1149967	.1594882	.0356626	-.1896394	-.0403539	-3.225	19	.004

Since *p-value* recorded is 0.004, this study rejects the null hypothesis proposed earlier;
H_0 : There is no significant difference between ESL students' performance when learning through online learning and blended learning in answering reading questions.
However, *H_1 : There is a significant difference between ESL students' performance when learning through online learning and blended learning in answering reading questions* is accepted.

These results suggest that blended learning does have an effect on students' understanding of their lessons. Specifically, our results suggest that blended learning has positive effects on students' performance compared to online learning. Moreover, the results highlight the previous independent t test run by Ghazizadeh (2017) where the null hypothesis was also rejected as blended learning has a significantly positive impact on the reading proficiency of Iranian EFL learners.

RQ2: *Do students prefer online learning or blended learning for reading lessons?*

To address the second research question, interview sessions were carried out to gain the information on students' preference between online learning and blended learning for their reading lessons. The interviews were recorded and transcribed before the data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Based on the thematic analysis that was conducted, three main themes of preference were identified as displayed in the following table.

Table 3: Thematic Analysis

Category	Term in Category	Interview excerpt
Collaborative learning	Discussion	Because we do it with our lecturer, so we do it together and also

		everyone in class. So we can while we're doing we can ask about our friends …I can ask my friends how to do it.
	Instant feedback	Because when at first we face-to-face with the lecturer we can ask question easily. There is no need to type whatsapp..formal text..and the grammar must right
	Question-answer session	So for me Blended Learning is easy because at least I can ask the lecturer what's that, what was something that I don't understand.
	Reference	For me, online learning is just learn something online but there is no reference. Blended Learning you learn something online and get reference through the lecturer.
Comprehension	Better understanding	Because I can communicate with you, ask questions, but Online Learning I don't really understand. I understand but sometimes it is hard to understand some words and I don't see lecturer at Online Learning method.
	Effective learning	It is more effective because you are there for us, explain more about that. Online Learning there is less communication from you
Motivation	Intrinsic motivation	Maybe because when we have task, and we..So I will more motivate to do rather than just learning from Online..
	Extrinsic motivation	Because I can know other's opinion. So, I can relate with mine that not good.

Based on the thematic analysis conducted, the theme collaborative learning indeed proves the effectiveness of blended learning in reading lessons as investigated in this research. This is supported by Nicol (2009) as cited in Wong and Yang (2017) where the use of technology in education particularly blended learning, enables students to share their learning with friends and teachers which consequently boosts their learning interest. Further the instant feedback stemming from collected responses from their collaborative effort served as the motivating factor.

The themes comprehension and motivation also play a vital role in students' preference when comparing online learning and blended learning. The findings of this research have confirmed the results obtained by Ghazizadeh (2017) which reported blended learning can improve students' comprehension in reading lessons as well as promoting motivation and interest throughout the process. Thus, learners can enjoy using technology while learning English and therefore associate both as a positive, more desirable learning process.

Conclusion and Future Works

In conclusion, English as a Second Language Diploma students in Malaysia specifically UiTM (University of Mara Technology) have benefited remarkably from the implementation of blended learning in the curriculum. They can experience the use of modern technology in education independently and while face to face with the teachers in class. These benefits have been proven through their higher scores when determining shift from pre-test compared to post-test results. The study also proves the combination of traditional and modern curriculum in education yields a significant positive change to both learners and educators. For future research, it is recommended this research model be used to investigate the effectiveness of blended learning on other language skills.

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