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Research paper



Revitalising English Teacher Education through Blended Learning: A Boon or Bane?

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Abstract

Presently, there are a growing trend and accrued interest to optimize education through technology. More specifically, there is a paradigm shift to integrate online learning with classroom training, resulting in the conception of blended learning. Nevertheless, the Government's multi-million investments to increase the use of ICT and teachers' ICT literacy skills has incessantly been of little fruition and this has raised an unabated concern for the utilization of online learning in an in-service training programme for English teachers or more popularly known as Pro-ELT ((Professional Up-skilling of English Language Teachers). Thereby, this paper intends to survey the English teachers' perceptions of the use of online learning in the Pro-ELT Programme. The findings indicated that the majority of respondents reacted positively to the incorporation of online learning in the aforesaid programme. However, there is a vocal chorus of concern about, *inter alia*, the Internet accessibility, the ease of online learning platform and its friendliness. The paper culminates with implications of the study and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: *Blended learning; In-service teacher training; Online learning; Pro-ELT; Teacher professional development*

1. Introduction

In this era and age, there has been a rapid advancement in science and technology, thus significantly affecting almost every sphere of life. In the past, little did one know and realize that education is not necessarily conducted through face to-face learning mode. At present, with the robust development in the field of science and technology, education is accessible to the mankind anywhere and anytime. Thus, it is not surprising to note there is a growing trend to optimize education through technology. This is more pronounced in the field of teacher education where teachers not only have to be competent in their area of specialization [30] but must also possess high competencies in ICT skills emanating from the massive influence of technology in education [15]. As a matter of fact, the reverence for the incorporation of technology into today's teaching and learning process is catapulted by the needs of millennial students who are very much intrigued by the advent of technologies. In relation to that, there has been a radical shift in the running of in-service training programme from a total reliance on in-class training to e-learning in the hope that the quality of learning can be maximized to the fullest which the former might not be able to provide given its constraints and limitations in fulfilling the needs of the digital residents.

In spite of the burgeoning popularity of e-learning, there has also been an increasing trend in integrating online learning with classroom training, resulting in the conception of blended learning. Referring to [35], blended learning differs from web-based and online distance learning in which it is characterised by a deliberate combination of classroom-based and virtual interventions, aimed to make learning experience more stimulating, refreshing and innovative [47]. All in all, the whole idea of blended learning should not be mistakenly judged as a deliberate "ad-on" to face-to-face learning; instead both the traditional and contemporary ways of learning are meant to perfectly complete and harmonize each other well. However, from the viewpoint of [32], what matters most is effective professional development, be it retrogressive or progressive should be geared towards enriching teachers' content knowledge, building on what they have acquired whilst promoting active learning. With such realization in mind, it is of paramount importance to safeguard the quality of teacher professional training programme and not to be deluded by the convenience that online learning could offer [18].

Mapping the above circumstance against the studied context, it is worthwhile to acknowledge the fact that the utilization of ICT in school is disappointingly low in terms of quality and quality [33]. Even though a massive proportion of Malaysian in-service teachers or specifically 356, 246 out of 413, 233 is reported to exhibit beyond the minimum level of ICT literacy based on an online diagnostic test [34], the fact that the Government's multi-million investments to increase the use of ICT and teachers' ICT literacy skills have incessantly been of little fruition cannot be overemphasized [45]. In view of that, this has raised salient issues on the efficacy of the blended language enhancement programme for in-service Malaysian English teachers or more prominently known as Pro-ELT (Professional Up-skilling for English Language Teachers) which is comprised of 240 hours face-to-face and another 240 hours online learning sessions [37]. Such the programme has never ceased to raise a growing chorus of concern, particularly, relating to the deployment of online learning when it has incurred much discomfort and inconvenience, contrasting to what it aspires to function.

In spite of having been in operation since 2012, little studies have sufficiently addressed and brought to the forefront the voices of the programme participants [40, 41, 42]. This is neither startling

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nor puzzling realizing that the roles and views of English teachers have always been immobilised in scores of in-service language training and foreign language teacher education programme [3] primarily in Asian contexts [48] which includes Malaysia. Thereby, this matter should be dealt with in no time due to the fact that they are the key players that impact the viability and sustainability of the programme or education reform the most [40]. More worryingly, very little studies on Pro-ELT have attempted to delve into the usage of online learning in enhancing the language skills of English teachers, if any, conducted by the trainers of the said programme [9], thus raising the researcher effect or Hawthorne effect [38]. Coupled with the issue of transparency which invariably results in mixed results [12] and the fact that there are inadequate studies on blended learning in language teacher education [49] especially in the Malaysian context [20], all of these give all the more reason to pursue the undertaking study. In fact, the current study is in tandem with the second wave of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025), projected at determining to what extent Pro-ELT has been effective in accomplishing its goal to enhance English teachers' language proficiency level or in this case through online learning. Towards this end, the present study intends to answer the following research question:

1) What are the English teachers' perceptions of the use of online learning in the Pro-ELT Programme?

2. Literature review

Having reviewed and analysed a multitude of studies on online learning espoused in blended language programmes, there has been ample mixed evidence discovered. In other words, while such learning have benefitted some groups of learners, there are others who have found it less beneficial. Notwithstanding, there are 4 ascertained themes which have continuously resurfaced in the extant literature on blended learning. In this vein, these are some key concerns that should be acknowledged before the running of blended programme so that the impact of such learning can be sustained and immensely felt, thus achieving what is envisioned.

2.1. Internet accessibility and connectivity

Having a reliable connectivity is indispensable in online learning. In fact, it is an essential prerequisite for a successful implementation of blended learning [17]. In the studied context, it is often fraught with poor Internet connectivity and has clearly remained among the impediments to a smooth online learning experience [29]. Insofar the average Internet connection in Malaysia is concerned, it is acutely lower at the speed of 8.9 Megabits per second than other ASEAN countries such as Singapore (20.3), Thailand (16) and Vietnam (9.5) and not only that, Malaysia is thwarted by its slowest mobile Internet speed in Asia Pacific [1]. Taking these matters into account, this would have posed a great difficulty to the smooth execution of blended learning on the basis that regardless of format either synchronous or asynchronous, it is hugely dependent upon the strength of the Internet connection. Failing to provide access to the Internet while undergoing blended learning programme might have jeopardised and derailed the whole quality of learning as intended. To illustrate, respondents in the study of [47] expressed difficulty getting connected to the online website to the extent they had to undergo unnecessary troubles manifested in the acts of going to cybercafés and staying up late. Such experience is not entirely unique to [47] as the participants in Oman were beset with a similar problem in getting accessed to the Internet even at the comfort of their homes [44]. More interestingly, however, [28] pointed out that teachers in rural areas, even constricted by limited Internet connectivity, remained enthusiastic to get involved in online discussions and chat sessions. In spite of that, such revelation cannot be generalised as what works in certain contexts might prove otherwise in others [39]. Additionally, there should be a continued effort to bridge the digital gap between rural and town areas, thus providing all settings with increased and reliable connectivity [45] crucial for e-learning to take place.

2.2 Responsiveness and satisfaction with online learning

The subsequent contention deserves detailed consideration as blended language programme carried out in the studied context is projected at teachers whose lessons are mostly confined to face-to-face learning sessions, thus giving rise to the issue of responsiveness in online learning. This is supported by [22] and further buttressed by [43] where there were noticeable accounts of dissatisfaction and disappointments when online learning instructors were found irresponsive, failing to provide response and offer feedback at an opportune time. Contrary to [22] and [43], [21] and [49] conceded that so long as its convenience, access, efficiency and flexibility can be increased, online learning can function as effectively as traditional learning. To add, it can be ascertained that teachers especially were more drawn to relay instructions to students face-to-face and discuss results in classroom in lieu of in forums [21]. From the viewpoint of [4], such preference is fathomable wherein they might feel compelled to protect a more genuine form of rapport with students. This is in alignment with [36] who concluded that teachers of English as a foreign language, particularly, are not receptive to online instruction owing to its lacking interactivity. What is important, to them, is they have the privilege to monitor, amongst which, students' engagement to the task, the communication taking place amongst the circle of students, their body gestures and facial expressions; the nature of communication that distinguishes face to face learning from online learning. Such arising concern is palpable in language learning wherein the physical presence of language instructors is imperative for learners to effectively acquire speaking skills and learn pronunciation [2]. Therefore, in consideration of the above, it greatly explains why till to date, teachers have always clung faithfully to the ex-cathedra teaching which is inextricably linked to a powerful feature of academic identity albeit concerted efforts to promote student-centred learning [4, 45]

2.3 Ease of use and friendliness

The next issue of contention is concerned with the ease of use and friendliness afforded by online learning. This matter deserves to be of great concern as it would impact the interest and attitudes towards online learning [44]. To explicate, in the study of [31] who investigated the perceptions and attitudes of 130 university students in English department towards blended learning of English course, it is to be noted that the integration of social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, etc rendered their English learning experience more collaborative, interactive and appealing. In a similar fashion, [28] argued that the Whatsapp messaging platform was greatly favoured because it was much friendlier and could get learners of diverse geographical settings engaged at the same time. Echoing [28], a similar result was discovered by [8] when the use of highly influential social media platform such as Whatsapp had resulted in an increased learner participation among 74 in-service English teachers as compared to the other learning platform, Moodle. Amongst the primary factors contributing to the enhanced rate of participation lie in their acclimatisation with and the user-friendliness of Whatsapp. Unfortunately, programme designers have paid little attention to the main principle behind virtual environment which is education as they have been focused on the technological capabilities and engrossed in what gadgets and network platforms could offer [6, 7]. This was well documented by [44, 46] where there was evidence of discomfort when undertaking online learning predominantly because the tools exposed were not user friendly, complicated and difficult to handle even after having attended all the training sessions successfully.

2.4 English proficiency level and targetted language skills

Of greater concern is the learners' English proficiency level as it could leave a mark on the success of online learning. In relation to that, [43] was of the opinion that less competent English learners were more disposed towards classroom activities on the one hand, thus indicating dependency on online instructor. Meanwhile, their competent peers coupled with higher learning motivation found much immense excitement in computer assisted language learning on the other hand. Besides proficiency in English, the situation could have been dire when involving adult learners who were usually worried about their cognitive ability and not ready for online language learning courses [10]. Within the same line of thoughts, it is of supreme importance to ensure the online component in blended learning, as in the case of the undertaking study, develop 4 core language skills crucial for developing professional confidence of non-native English speaking teachers [11, 25] given that not many studies have delved into the acquisition of language skills [27]. As a matter of fact, the integration of four language skills should be at the heart of language programme [16, 25], thus giving the programme participants a complete and comprehensive language learning experience. To elucidate, even though the study of [31] proved that the English course with the aid of online learning was helpful to improve the English language, there is unfortunately no mention as to which skill the learners greatly benefitted from. Before that, it was disclosed in the study by [27] that receptive skills (listening and reading) were better acquired through online platform productive skills (writing and speaking) on the basis that there were copious number of recordings that needed to be corrected and further intensified by the lack of control over communicative tasks. In a related work, [2] later supported by [24] revealed that the skill of reading was perceived the most valued skill acquired in virtual settings and in fact reading lessons were pervasively featured in blended language classrooms.

3. Research methodology

Generally, the study conducted falls under non-experimental design, employing a survey research design [5]. The survey questionnaire with a 4-point Likert scale comprising Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Agree (A) and Strongly Agree (SA) and 3 open-ended questions was adapted from [13]. In addition, the questionnaire was designed following the first level of the Kirkpatrick's evaluation model, aimed at investigating reactions to the use of online learning. It was later disseminated to the English Language Teaching Centre under the purview of the Education Ministry of Malaysia and British Council for contents checking and clarity purposes. Afterwards, the questionnaires were distributed to 111 respondents situated in predominantly rural vicinity who were purposively chosen to represent the pioneer batches of Pro-ELT following the desired modus operandi of how Pro-ELT should be executed [43]. With regard to data analysis, the gathered quantitative data were analysed descriptively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 where mean values generated were interpreted following the study of [23]; 0-1.25 classified as very negative,1.26-2.50 negative, 2.51-3.25 positive and 3.26-4.00 very positive. Meanwhile, the qualitative data elicited from open-ended questions were to support the quantitative results and at the same time, to further illuminate the issue researched.

4. Results and discussion

The following table illustrates the respondents' perceptions of the use of online learning incorporated into the Pro-ELT Programme.

Table 1: Perceptions of the use of online learning in the Pro-ELT Programme

Item	SD (%)	D (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Result
I was ready to learn using the online platform.	2 (1.8)	17 (15.3)	85 (76.6)	7 (6.3)	2.87	Positive
I learned reading skills online effectively.	-	24 (21.6)	78 (70.3)	9 (8.1)	2.86	Positive
I learned writing skills online effectively	-	27 (24.3)	76 (68.5)	8 (7.2)	2.83	Positive
I learned speaking skills online effectively.	-	39 (35.1)	66 (59.5)	6 (5.4)	2.70	Positive
I learned listening skills online effectively	-	34 (30.6)	71 (64)	6 (5.4)	2.75	Positive
The online module was easy to understand.	-	17 (15.3)	86 (77.5)	8 (7.2)	2.92	Positive

Note: SD denotes strongly disagree, D disagree, A agree, and SD strongly disagree. Percentages in parentheses.

Generally, the Pro-ELT Programme was perceived positively by the English teachers. As far as language skill is concerned, the mean score for speaking was the highest at 3.21 followed by writing (3.09), listening (3.07) and reading (3.06). In terms of overall improvement on the command of English, the mean value of 3.12 indicates that there was a consensus that the Pro-ELT programme had a positive impact on their proficiency in the English language. However, it was of grave concern that the mean value for their overall satisfaction with the programme, despite being responded positively, was the lowest.

The following table illustrates the respondents' reactions to the use of online learning incorporated into the Pro-ELT Programme. Generally, the below reactions are concerned with the readiness to learn online, the acquisition of lan

Based on the above table, it shows that the majority of the respondents (92) were ready to learn using the online platform. This is a good indicator where they are willing to embrace a new way of learning, thus further justifying the incorporation of online learning into the Pro-ELT Programme. Referring to R4, such novel way of learning is "relevant in today's teaching and learning process" where, as informed by R72 "they are not only expected to be proficient in the English language but also competent in the use of computer". In addition to that, R65 commented that there was no surprise that many welcomed such contemporary way of learning as "we have every now and then been exposed to the advent of technology at workplace" and because of that, "there is not much difficulty adjusting ourselves to e-learning." Even though many of them indicated their readiness for online learning, they were incessantly perturbed by the sorry state of Internet accessibility and connectivity. To illustrate, R32 noted that "it is very inconvenient to often times experience Internet disruption especially in rural setting where the programme was conducted" and this is further echoed in R51 who vocalized that such discomfort "at times dampens teachers' renewed interest in e-learning and this would have been dire consequences to run into such problem in the midst of answering online language proficiency test. Some were badly affected by it." All the concerns raised fortify [17]'s argument that a reliable Internet connectivity is integral for a successful blended learning.

Besides, the ease of online module was reacted positively by 94 respondents who agreed and strongly agreed to the item "the online module was easy to understand." Gleaning from responses in structured questions, they held a favourable view of online learning, amongst others, was because the online module was designed similar to in-class module. This is supported by R5 when he said that "the fact that the online module was pretty much similar to the classroom module helped to anticipate how online modules looked like". Furthermore, several obtained responses explained that there was no way for learners to misunderstand the assigned online tasks as "almost every online activity comes with its detailed instructions and guidelines" and "language used is easy to understand". As relayed by R48, the other factor that adds to the ease of online module is the fact that the online learning materials are systematically compartmentalized according to the language skills. Thus, it can be inferred that the use of online learning has not neglected the main principle behind virtual environment which is education, contrary to [6, 7]. However, there is a note of caution that there are a few who think otherwise, thereby resulting in a total of 17 respondents disagreeing to the item "the online module was easy to understand". Amongst the many reasons for such disagreement are "there has always been difficulty to navigate the website" and the fact that "it is not as interactive as Whatsapp, Facebook, etc" has to be viewed seriously, hence in concordance with [28, 44, 46]. Interestingly, even though there were some who found the online module easy to understand, they still suggested that further improvement should be made to the online learning portal considering that "there are too many buttons and links attached to the extent that it disturbs our concentration and focus whilst attempting to do online tasks". Accordingly, there is a sense of urgency to contend with the issues pointed out to assure that the use of online learning benefits all the targetted users.

With respect to the English language skills, it is evident that reading becomes the skill that most respondents learned best via online learning sessions ($\bar{x}$ = 2.86) in sync with [2, 24] followed by writing ($\bar{x}$=2.83) and listening ($\bar{x}$ = 2.75). On the contrary, the skill that they found least effective learned online is speaking ($\bar{x}$ = 2.70). To better explain the reasons for such outcomes, it is undeniable that many expressed the fact that online reading and writing exercises assigned to them proved to be no much difference from in-class. To reiterate, R67 argued that "the only difference is the medium of learning which triggers the programme participants to explore and experiment with a new orientation to learning." R95 further added that "regardless of medium of learning, all exercises designed are meant to complement one another." Aside from that, some concurred that the utilization of online learning was crucial in the sense it helped them to be mentally and cognitively ready for an online language proficiency test by the end of the training programme. For instance, R77 stated that "the approach to modern learning has certainly brought ambivalent reactions but one cannot refute the fact that such novelty helps to familiarise with and later tackle the end assessment very successfully." On the other hand, without denying the significance of online learning imbued in the Pro-ELT Programme, there have also been a few cautionary notes. Amongst the frequently mentioned setbacks of online learning is the fact there is no better to acquire speaking skills than face-to-face interaction. As stressed by R82, "I believe that I am not the only one who is very much against the acquisition of speaking skill through online platform as it is not a genuine form of communication." In a similar fashion, R16 vocalised her dismay where "the artificial online communication robs the essence of communication wherein I feel neither engaged nor connected with a speaker in a virtual setting." Likewise, R70 felt the same way and he opined that "speaking skills might not be best acquired online as I value the traditional form of interaction very much where I could clearly see their facial expressions and body gestures." Such belief is not unusual as it resonates with [36] who claimed that teachers of English are deeply concerned about the issue of inter-activity. Moreover, looking at the matter from the viewpoint of an English language teacher, R31 was of the opinion that "to confidently converse in English certainly needs constant practice in a setting where ones can directly observe and monitor the speed, pauses, intonation, and enunciation as well as first- hand experience the exchange of utterances in a tangible context. So, they would not feel as though they were talking to a robot in a fully automated setting." This lends support to [2] in which speaking skills and pronunciation are best acquired through face-to-face. Amidst the tension circulating around the aforementioned issue, there is no denying that online learning at large is not entirely bad as it does support the development of 4 core language skills for English teachers [11, 24], hence being an emblem of effectual use of online learning in one form or another. Most importantly, cognisant of the ever- growing prominence of e-learning, any ascertained deficiencies should be noted seriously and addressed promptly to benefit the targetted users for more sustainable effects in their overall ICT competencies. Therefore, it is compelling to highlight R55's standpoint on online learning in which "no matter how defiant or resistant we are towards technology, it will never stop influencing and charting the future of the world we live in." Thereby, it sends a strong signal to either progress with it or perish.

5. Conclusion

The undertaking study has cast light into the English teachers' perceptions to the use of online learning in the Pro-ELT Programme. Evidently, the majority of them perceived the incorporation of online learning positively. Despite that, there are several areas of concern that need to be surmounted in order to optimize the efficacy of online learning in Pro-ELT. In light of the findings obtained, it ultimately points to the need for the amalgamation of face-to-face and online learning sessions to render the whole learning experience more impactful and realise the potentialities of blended learning to the fullest. In other words, it is always ideal to strike a balanced approach particularly to English teacher education. It is also worth pointing out that the findings obtained might not be generalised to all other Pro-ELT programme participants given the nature of purposive sampling which recruited only the pioneer batches situated in mostly rural areas. Thus, it is hoped that future research would consider engaging programme participants in different cohorts and geographical settings so as to gain a more comprehensive view of the issue at hand. Intriguingly, in spite of such constraints, there is no doubt that the study has unravelled and foregrounded the issue of central importance which would be a boon to revitalise the English teacher education through blended learning aggressively permeating the realm of teacher professional development across the globe presently.

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