THE STUDENTS' PREFERENCE OF BLENDED ENGLISH TEACHING IN INTENSIVE READING COURSE---A CASE STUDY

Leilei Xiao[1], Fadzilah Abd Rahman[2]

[1]School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Jianzhu University,No.1000 Fengming Road, Jinan, Shandong, 250101, People's Republic of China

[1,2]Faculty of Education and Liberal Studies, City University Malaysia, No.8, Jalan 51A/223, 46100 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT – The digitalization of education has become a prevailing trend and online-offline blended English teaching has been widely applied at all levels of education. How English teachers can better improve the teaching efficiency of the blended teaching in the EFL context. Many scholars have done numerous research on the efficiency of blended English teaching, but comparatively few research focuses on the efficiency of blended teaching involving students' expectation and preference. By conducting qualitative research, the study analyses qualitative data collected by in-depth interviews before and after the blended teaching and probes into the efficiency of blended teaching which takes students' expectation and preference into consideration. Three themes are derived from the before-interview which were reading difficulties, student involvement, and teacher's instruction. Another three themes which are more reading materials, preliminary self-learning mode, and teacher's instructions are derived from the interview after the blended teaching. It is suggested that involving the students' expectation and preference when designing the blended research is more likely to have more efficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Long before the breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic, Online and offline blended English teaching aimed at improving teaching and learning efficiency has been the prevailing trend in higher education in China, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) and Small Private Online Courses (SPOC) and flipped classroom have been widely used in the college English class, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic period and post-pandemic period. Many scholars have conducted research on how well the blended teaching method is accepted by the students and the effect of this teaching method. It is acknowledged that blended teaching can enhance the quality of learning experiences, enable students to learn English more enjoyably and actively, and facilitate the engagement of students in English comprehensive learning skills at all levels in different regions(Anthony et al.,2019; Castle & McGuire,2010; Wong et al.,2020; Yen et al.,2018).

Teaching and learning can never be divided. More research is carried out to test the blended English teaching efficiency on the basis of the already existing blended teaching courses or modes. Few research involved the learners' preferences and expectations when designing blended teaching and testing its efficiency.

Hence, the purpose of the research is to explore learners' preferences and expectations of blended English teaching, involve these preferences and expectations when designing blended English intensive reading learning, and tentatively examine the change in learning efficiency. By reviewing and analysing the previous literature, the qualitative research will be conducted by collecting and analysing data with the help of convenience sampling and coding approach. Themes will be derived and explained. The researcher hopes to provide some insights for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

About blended teaching, many believed that "With the help of modern information technology, the "online" and "offline" English teaching can be organically combined" and "Students can conduct classroom display under the guidance of teachers or group cooperation through the "online" self-study before class and carry out learning discussion in the "offline" class, so as to promote students' ability of

independent thinking and innovative learning. Students of different levels can arrange the schedule according to their own learning habits. The task of teachers is to teach students how to learn and build knowledge so as to make classroom teaching more vivid and innovative." (Sun, 2020, p4).

Some researchers have probed into the effects of blended teaching on the four integrated English skills separately at different levels to verify whether it improves the learning of these four English skills. After reviewing the available literature broadly, Hashemi (2020) in his research concluded that blended learning positively affects each of the integrated skills of the English language. Jiang, Chen, Lu and Wang (2021) confirmed in their research that Online and offline blended teaching mode was conducive to enhancing young Chinese junior high school students' listening performance. Wang (2020) emphasised in her research that blended learning had an overall positive effect on the student's English conversation performance. One research also found that after conducting longitudinal research on online and offline reading comprehension for Iranian EFL learners, students' reading is promoted to a higher degree when exposed to online texts that have links to other websites that have more reading content (Rahimi and Behjat, 2011, as cited in Hashemi, 2020). Utilising blended teaching while maintaining good aspects of traditional offline teaching has a positive impact on students' reading achievement (Setyawan, 2019). Blended learning enables the students to collaboratively enhance their writing skills (Sharma & Barrett, 2009, as cited in Hashemi,2020). Some researchers also probe into the students' intention and acceptance of blended learning. Bokolo, Kamaludin, Romli, Raffei, Phon, Abdullah, Ming, Shurkor, Nordin and Baba (2020) asserted that the attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control and self-efficacy influence students' intention to accept blended learning and the intention of students to accept blended learning approach is significantly influenced by actual blended learning deployment. Also, in this article, researchers fully reviewed the previous few studies that examined the acceptance of blended teaching in institutions of higher learning. As cited in their research, Ted (2019) investigated students' and lecturers' intentions to use technology for teaching and learning. In Ted's study, only the students' and lecturers' intention to use technology is explored. University learners' intention to use e-learning is also explored (Al-Rahmi et al. 2018, as cited in Bokolo, Kamaludin, Romli, Raffei, Phon, Abdullah, Ming, Shurkor, Nordin and Baba, 2020). Few studies have conducted research on the students' expectations and preferences for blended teaching. Hence, the research will tentatively do action research on the efficiency of blended teaching involving students' expectations and preferences.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research conducted a case study approach to explore students' expectations and preferences of blended teaching with the purpose of improving learning efficiency. The data collection method utilised is semi-structured in-depth interviews. Chinese university students who majored in English are the theoretical sample population. Convenience sampling was chosen to collect the data as the researcher has access to university English majors. Five students who majored in English at one university in Northern China volunteered themselves to participate in the two in-depth interviews before and after the blended teaching. The researcher gave informed consent to the participants before the research actually took place and informed the participants they had the absolute freedom to leave the research anytime they wanted for no reason. No practical favour was granted to the participants. Open coding was adopted to analyse the initial data which themes were derived from. The researcher first transcribed the interview and read the transcript line by line over and over again to obtain the data chunk. Then, the researcher extracted salient points from the data chunk and assigned codes to identify the salient points. The coding process continued until themes were derived from the transcript.

RESULTS

At the end of the coding process, for each interview, three themes were derived from the transcripts respectively. As shown in Table 1 and Table 2 below, the themes are listed in the order of mentioned frequency.

Table 1. Explanation of Themes derived from the pre-interview.

Themes	Explanation of Themes
Differentiated teaching contents	Students expected different teaching contents in online and offline teaching.
Reading difficulties	Most of the interviewed students admitted that they had reading difficulties towards certain English reading material.
Students' involvement	Students expressed their willingness to be involved in the offline learning process.
Teacher's instruction	Students mentioned they highly demanded instructions from their teachers.

Differentiated Teaching Contents

All students expected the teaching contents in online and offline teaching to be different. In an astonishingly similar way, they preferred to learn cultural background information and vocabulary online and grammar, sentence structure analysis and article appreciation offline.

Participant 5 said when conveying the content preference:

"Cultural background information usually is interesting and easy to search for information on the internet, and we can learn it online by ourselves."

While Participant 3 mentioned:

"I think it's better to put vocabulary interpretation online because it will save lots of offline teaching time, and we students can memorise the vocabulary at our own pace."

For offline learning content, more complicated and advanced language exercises are preferred.

Participant 1 said when expressing the preference for offline teaching content:

"Grammar should be accurate, and we are not sure we grasp the grammatical rules just by online learning; offline grammar study attaches certainty and accuracy."

Reading Difficulties

4 out of 5 students talked about difficulties when doing English reading. Interest is one of the main reasons for the reading difficulties. University students who are raised in the digital age nowadays are not all fans of books, to be straightforward.

Participant 2 said when asked why it is difficult to accomplish reading tasks:

"I just don't like reading. I like watching short videos or movies. If I must read something in English, I prefer fairy tales and anecdotes."

Limited vocabulary and lack of cultural knowledge are other reasons why participants encountered reading difficulties.

Participant 1 said when talking about the distress when reading English novels during the interview:

"Sometimes, for one single page (of the novel), I need to look up more than ten words in the dictionary. It takes lots of time, and I don't think the reading is a pleasure at all."
Participant 4 also expressed the same painfulness when doing the English reading:

"I get very bored when I have difficulty understanding the novels written by native speakers due to the insufficient vocabulary and limited cultural background information, and the whole process just makes me feel inferior."

Students' Involvement

Almost all of the participants wanted to be more involved in blended teaching since they believed that online and offline teaching would give them more time to prepare before and after class. They desired to have the opportunity to share with others what they had prepared because by doing so, based on their previous learning experience, they increased their language skills as well as self-confidence. They expected the online teaching to be more instructional and inspirational, and they can be more motivated to do individual or group class presentations.

Participant 5 told the researcher when expressing the wish to be more involved in offline classes:

"I want to be more involved in the offline class because I got the experience of oral English class. In that class, we got many class presentation activities, and we prepared a lot before and after class, AND we learned a lot!"

Teacher's Instruction

Participants valued the teacher's instruction in the blended teaching. They expected to get instructional guidance from their teachers and hoped that their teachers could be more strict with them due to their own weak self-discipline.

Participant 2 said:

"I can be very hardworking, but I definitely need a teacher's guidance to broaden my vision and to give me something that I could never think of."

Participant 3 expressed the demand for strictness from teachers:

"If the teacher tells me if I don't do this, I will definitely fail my exam. Surely, the learning efficiency will be better improved."

Table 2. Explanation of Themes derived from the post-interview.

Themes	Explanation of Themes
More reading materials	Students in the interview expressed their desire to read more
Preliminary self-learning mode	Students believed that a preliminary self-learning mode was formed through the blended teaching
Teacher's instruction	Students stressed they still demanded instructions from their teachers

More Reading Materials

After the blended teaching involving students' preferences and expectations, Participants demand more reading materials from teachers, and they themselves also find some reading materials to read.

Participant 2 said :

"Now I am interested not only in fairy tales but some inspirational stories, and I've been reading *Little Prince* recently."

Preliminary Self-Learning Mode

In the mode of blended teaching, students adapted themselves to complementary online and offline learning; their learning ability had been improved. A preliminary self-learning mode had been developed.

Participant 5 said when talking about the benefits of blended teaching:

"When reading something new in English, I know what I can do and where to search for references to improve my understanding. I can learn more by myself."

Teacher's Instruction

Students stressed they still demanded their teachers' instructions as they knew there's more knowledge and approaches they needed to learn from their teachers. All participants expressed similar opinions on the issue.

"I want more instructions from my teachers."

DISCUSSION

Based on the qualitative research, by surveying students' preferences and expectations of online blending, the researcher and other teachers constructed an online and offline blended intensive English reading course. In this course, the teachers did the following to improve learning efficiency:

1. Designed online and offline teaching content more scientifically and to the targeted audience's content; therefore, the teaching was more accepted, and students were more motivated,
2. Set more targeted teaching objectives and provide more appropriate reading materials after knowing the obstacles students face,
3. Teachers schemed class activities to be more students-involved by offering them more opportunities to give individual or group presentations, and
4. Turned a teacher-centred learning mode into a teacher-instructed, student-centred learning mode.

The themes derived from the in-depth interview after the blended learning course suggested that involving the students' expectations and preferences when designing the blended research is more likely to have more efficiency.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The qualitative research might provide some proof that learning is always an interactive process, involving both teaching and learning parties is a win-win strategy. More similar case studies involving students' preferences and expectations of blended English learning can be replicated. Future studies are also invited to do some mixed educational research, i.e., quantitative data can also be collected during and after the blended teaching course conduction to make the research more persuasive.

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