

AN EXPLORATION OF THE ACCEPTANCE OF BLENDED LEARNING IN PRIVATE ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: *This study explores the acceptance of blended learning (BL) among educators and students in Private Islamic Higher Educational Institutions (PIHEIs). In the wake of COVID 19 pandemic, integration of technology has become increasingly important with blended learning (BL) emerging as a valuable alternative for educators and learners. BL combines traditional method where face to face instruction and online learning are being integrated allowing flexibility in teaching and learning. This research aims to understand the perceptions, challenges, and acceptance of both educators and students in adopting BL. Using a qualitative methodology, six educators and ten English Language students were interviewed using a semi structured question. Thematic revealed three key themes: Technological Challenges, Attitudes Towards Blended Learning, and Preferences for Traditional Learning Methods. Subthemes for technological challenges included issues such as technical difficulties, digital literacy, and infrastructure limitations. Attitudes towards blended learning varied, with some participants expressing positive views on its flexibility and effectiveness, while others highlighted difficulties in maintaining engagement and motivation. For preference for traditional face-to-face instruction, it was clearly stated that participants valuing direct interaction and immediate feedback. The findings suggest that in ensuring a successful implementation of BL in PIHEIs, it requires addressing technological barriers, enhancing digital literacy and providing a strong support system. The study concludes that careful planning and ongoing support are essential to increase the acceptance of blended learning in Islamic higher education contexts.*

Keywords: *Blended Learning (BL), Private Islamic Higher Educational Institutions (PIHEIs), Technological Acceptance, Educator Readiness, Students Acceptance.*

Introduction

In the era of 21st century, educators are moving towards the integration of technology in all aspects of teaching and learning. As for students, technology is seen as interactive and helpful in their learning. Face to face instruction is seen as outdated. Many studies shown that the declined of lecture attendance is due to the availability of digital recordings and other online resources. (Edwards & Clinton, 2019) Hence, blended learning (BL) was introduced in 1990s and early 2000s by Clayton Christensen and his colleagues at the Harvard Business School. In the year 2020, due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, there was unfamiliar and unprecedented challenges for the entire world. The implementation of BL emerged as a result of the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Saboowala & Manghirmalani Mishra, 2021). According to them, BL is one of the models proposed by various education experts and research scholars that seems to be a viable and most suitable solution for educational institutes for at least a period of several months after the pandemic. This has led to the post-Covid- 19 era where educators and students use and adapt the BL method in their classes after using online learning for a period of time.

BL is a concept that combines or blends traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning (Saboowala & Manghirmalani Mishra, 2021). As cited in Malaysia Qualification Accreditation Education Standard Programme, BL is an integrated instructional approach that combines face-to-face classroom methods, whether digitally immediate or remote (usually internet-based and technology-mediated) learning. BL includes tools that have different educational functions for the students that range from compact discs (CDs), online animations, e-mail, audio, and multimedia technology used in a real classroom environment also known as a face-to-face classroom (Kazu & Demirkol, 2014). The idea of combining face-to-face instruction with an online delivery method is supported by a body of research, despite obstacles to its feasibility and applicability in the context of higher education (Okaz, 2015). One of the most important considerations in running a BL course is the 'appropriateness' of each medium of course delivery and the related matching of the delivery type to the learning activity (Sharma P, 2010). Besides, combining traditional face to face methods and online classes has increased students' motivation in learning. According to (Broadbent J. , 2017), when BL is done correctly, face to face learning with the modality of online learning will benefit the students.

The use of gadgets and the Internet has increased in education sector especially in the implementation of BL. However, various challenges and issues about the use of technology in the education sector have become a public conversation and provoked debate between them. Traditionally, it has been argued that the lack of appropriate infrastructure and access to the technology may pose some challenges to the successful integration of BL (Namyssova, G., Tussupbekova, G., Helmer, J., Malone, K., Mir, A., & Jonbekova, D, 2019). This causes the learning process to be disrupted because there are several students in one community who are likely to experience this problem and disrupt the whole learning process. Apart from that, educators and students also facing problems in their computer skills. It has been proven by the respondents' answers in the study conducted by M Tshabalala, C Ndeya-Ndereya, T van der Merwe (2014). It shows that "inadequate technology knowledge, need training" from respondents' answers gave evidence of their poor computer skills. Tshabalala, Ndeya-Ndereya,

and Merwe (2014) remarked that “lack of technological and computer skills” as one of the lists of challenges that add to the constraints in the implementation of BL.

The readiness of educators towards BL approach could also be questioned. Their ability to conduct online platforms has turned the tables on educators by making the educators, the learners (Saboowala & Manghirmalani Mishra, 2021). The educators’ perception needs to be emphasized in this regard. However, the question is, are the educator able to conduct BL classroom that needs knowledge in navigating the technology? A previous study investigating the readiness of in- service educators toward a Blended Learning approach was carried out by Saboowala & Manghirmalani Mishra (2021). It is found that the current pandemic has added fuel to the fire by leaving no choice but to adopt BL as one of the best-fit methods to be implemented once things return to normal causing the un-readiness of educators to be seen clearly (Saboowala & Manghirmalani Mishra, 2021). A research also done by M Tshabalala, C Ndeya-Ndereya, T van der Merwe (2014) which conclude some educators' did not accept BL. Their responses such as "never heard of blended learning" and “Not using blended learning due to a lack of knowledge” show a less encouraged acceptance of BL.

It is obvious that both educators and students are facing problems in the implementation of BL. There are negative perceptions held by them regarding this learning method. Such perceptions relate to attitudes towards innovation and change, time required for implementation, workload, level of institutional support, the available technology infrastructure, instructional delivery methods, and quality assurance (M Tshabalala, C Ndeya- Ndereya, T van der Merwe, 2014). Furthermore, the rapid changes in the use of technology have had an impact on learning methods in the 21st century. The use of information and communication technology (ICT)-based technologies has transformed the entire teaching pedagogy into a learner-centered pedagogy, with technology skills becoming the most important qualification for both educators/educators and learners (R Bordoloi, P Das, K Das, 2021). Along with this growth in technology, however, there is a concern with the lack of suitable infrastructure and access to technology which can cause some constraints for the successful integration of BL (G Namyssova, G Tussupbekova, J Helmer, K Malone, A Mir, D Jonbekova, 2019). The growth of technology that can be linked to the presence of e- learning has created various problems or challenges that are currently and will be faced by educators and students. (M Tshabalala, C Ndeya-Ndereya, T van der Merwe, 2014) have a list of challenges hindering the implementation of e-learning which are the lack of a policy that promotes e-learning within teaching and learning, lack of quality management processes to enhance e-learning, limited initiatives for the professional development of staff, and considerable funding needed to implement a successful e-learning program. All of the challenges that have been listed can be questioned about the acceptance of educators and students in various country and setting. Consequently, a study that leads to review whether BL is accepted for both educators and students in private Islamic Institutions is duly needed.

There are lack of research related to acceptance of BL in Private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PIHEIs) in Malaysia. Most studies are more focused on the challenges of blended learning or the success factors of BL in different demographic. This is like a study conducted by Taufiq et al (2022) that touched on the acceptance of BL among Early Childhood Education students in public university using quantitative study. Hence, based on this gap, the researcher exploring the acceptance of educators and students on BL in Private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PIHEIs) using thematic analysis to find out the acceptance of BL among PIHEIs educators and students. The research questions for this study are thus formulated as follows :

1. Do educators accept blended learning in their teaching?

2. Do English language learners accept blended learning in their educational experience?

Methodology

In addressing the research question, a qualitative analysis was employed in this study to measure the acceptance of BL among educators and students. The qualitative method was used to identify the common themes representing the acceptance of BL for both educators and students.

A semi structured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed answers for all the six educators and ten students. Semi-structured interview is a data collection method that relies on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework (George. T, 2024).

Table 1 and 2 provides some background on the participants. The participants in this study were selected using the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling technique referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling. This method is a form where the researcher will rely on their own judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in the interview. A total of sixteen participants were invited to participate in the study comprising six educators and ten English Language students who took part in individual interviews.

The six educators were selected based on their extensive experience in teaching. They are knowledgeable and have firsthand exposure to blended learning environments. By selecting educators who are actively involved, this study can gather rich and detailed relevant data. On the other hand, the ten students were selected because they had actively participated in blended learning environments which impacted their learning experiences. They are able to reflect on their experiences with blended learning and their feedback sheds light on how blended learning influences engagement and satisfaction. This combination of educators and students ensures a comprehensive exploration of blended learning from both instructional and learner viewpoints.

A coding system was applied to identify the educators, labelled as L01 – L06 and for students S01 – S010.

Table 1 : Educators’ Demographic

Participant	Gender	Years of Teaching
L-01	Female	17 years
L-02	Female	10 years
L-03	Female	17 years
L-04	Female	7 years
L-05	Female	10 years
L-06	Male	15 years

Table 2 : Students’ Demographic

Participant	Gender	Age
S-01	Male	21

S-02	Male	22
S-03	Female	22
S-04	Female	20
S-05	Female	22
S-06	Female	21
S-07	Male	20
S-08	Female	20
S-09	Female	21
S-10	Female	22

Below are the interview questions:

Educators

1. What do you understand by the term blended learning? Give examples.
2. Could you describe your first experience with blended learning?
3. How do you feel about using blended learning?
4. Do you prefer using blended learning in your teaching?
5. What are the difficulties you had in using blended learning in your teaching?
6. Do you think your level of technology knowledge is sufficient for teaching a blended course? Why or why not?
7. Are you currently using blended learning as a teaching mode? Why or why not?

Students

1. Overall, how interested are you in your blended learning classes?
2. Could you describe your experience with the combination of online learning with your usual face-to-face teachings?
3. How do you feel about blended learning as a new learning approach?
4. What are the difficulties you had during this new learning approach in the course of learning?
5. Are you able to have good access to the use of technology such as computers and the Internet?
6. In your opinion, do you think Blended Learning can overcome your learning problems? In what context?

The thematic analysis method was employed in this study. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). A theme captures something important about the data related to the research questions and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Hence, thematic analysis provides a purely qualitative, detailed, and nuanced data account (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2012, 2013, 2014, 2020) have proposed a six-phase process, which can facilitate the analysis and help the researcher identify and attend to the important aspects of a thematic analysis. The thematic analysis plan consists of six phases familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the findings.

The six phases of analysis are as follows:

1. Familiarizing with the Data: The interview recordings were transcribed, and the researcher reviewed the transcripts multiple times to understand the overarching ideas, patterns, and direction concerning to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
2. Generating Initial Codes (Open Coding): The researcher generated initial codes by referring to interview transcription. It was done manually by reading the printed-out manuscripts and obtained the sense of the whole ideas. Then systematically coding the transcripts.
3. Generating Themes (Selective Coding): The researcher sorted the codes into potential themes and examined clusters of codes about the entire dataset. Themes represent interpretive analyses of the data, helping to draw insights about the phenomenon under study (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
4. Reviewing Themes: The researcher refined the themes by connecting them with existing knowledge, enhancing clarity, quality, and rigor. This step also facilitates consensus among researchers regarding theme development. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and organized to address the research questions. Concise, each theme was assigned descriptive titles. (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
6. Producing the Report: After completing the coding process, the researcher synthesized the themes and wrote the final report ((Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Through an in-depth analysis of the collected data, several key themes emerged that provide insight into this study. These themes reflect the core issues and experiences shared by the participants and are integral to understanding the study. The data collection subjected to a thematic analysis, which resulted in the formation of three key themes both research questions: Technological Challenges, Attitudes Towards Blended Learning and Preferences of Teaching Learning Methods.

Technological Challenges

Technological Difficulties

In understanding whether the participants accept BL or not, their experiences in implementing BL should take into account. Accessing online learning system and dealing with technical glitch are among significant factors among the lectures and students. Both participants facing technological challenges while implementing BL. This theme also encapsulated the fact that the participants agreed that the issue led to frustration and disrupted the learning process. The following are some excerpts of the interviews:

“ I find it useful but it is difficult for me to cope with the technical part” (L-05)

“Sometimes there are internet network interruption that caused me not to be able to access online classes” (S-01)

“Technical issues also occasionally disrupted my learning experience” (S-06)

Digital Literacy

BL has become the steps for both students and educators to improve their technological skills. The participants are effectively engaged with BL and creating a more conducive learning environment. This can be seen in the following quotations:

“I was quite challenging because we have no prior exposure or experience in managing BL”.(L-01)

“I don’t know much about technology and there are always internet problems”
(S-09)

Infrastructure

Unstable internet connection and having appropriate devices posed a significant barrier for both students and educators in implementing BL. Many lecturers mentioned that it is difficult maintain consistent engagement when internet connection unreliable. Students also facing the difficulties with internet connection and struggled to actively involve in online activities. This can be observed in the following quotations:

“Problems due to lack of necessary resources like stable internet connection or devices” (L-03)

“The difficulties that I’ve experienced are technical issues, self-discipline and engagement towards the class” (S-03)

“I always have good access to the use of computer but I always face the problem with the internet connection” (S-03)

Attitudes Towards Blended Learning

Positive Attitudes

However, despite of poor internet connections, some students expressed a positive attitude towards blended learning, highlighting its flexibility and the ability to access learning materials at their convenience. They believed that blended learning improves learning effectiveness, course performance, and offers flexibility. This is highlighted in the following excerpts:

“ I think blended learning can overcome my learning problem in the context of place since sometimes it is hard for me to go to class when I don’t have transportation” (S-03)

“So for me, I think, I am interested in the concept since it can help students, that mainly far away or that do not have the appropriate vehicles to go to campus” (S-04)

“Students’ belief that blended learning improves their learning effectiveness and course performance” (L-01)

Negative Attitudes

Meanwhile, some students reported a negative attitude towards blended learning. They found that they are unable to maintain motivation and focus during online sessions. A number of educators also were sceptical about the effectiveness of blended learning, preferring traditional face-to-face interactions for better student engagement. This is observed in the following excerpts:

“Another challenge is maintaining students focus during online classes. In physical classes, we can directly observe and engage with students, but online, we can't control their environment and whether they are paying attention, which makes it harder to deliver the lesson content effectively.”(L-01)

“But then when the students didn't turn on the camera, so it feels like we, the teachers, the lecturers are talking to the screen.”(L-02)

“I think BL can be very convenient to the teachers, but it is a little bit ineffective to some learners because I believe most learners, they prefer to meet their teachers face to face to understand better and to get immediate feedback from the teachers.” (L-03)

“I don't like blended teaching and learning is when the students do not cooperate by open camera, switch on the camera like they are online but I don't think they are there.”(L-05)

“Okay so from my experience for online learning of course, I did find it a bit awkward, I don't know how to use Microsoft Teams at that time. So it, it, actually take me a lot of time to learn how to maneuver, on the apps on how to use, to navigate through the apps, how to find my assignment, how to submit it, and compared to face to face, which is regulating since, we were, you know, elementary, middle school, high school.”(S-04)

“My experience in blended learning was initially a bit difficult for me to adapt to online learning because there are many platforms that I have to learn and get used to. Meanwhile, I am used to face-to-face learning.”(S-07)

“I'm not happy with online learning being used as a new lesson approach because I'm sure everyone can focus and understand online learning”, (S-09)

Acceptance Towards BL

Educators and students who adopt blended learning is significantly influenced by their previous experiences and attitudes towards technology. Educators are more likely to integrate technology in their teaching because they view technology as a beneficial teaching aid. Integrating and demonstrating willingness to embrace technology into their instructional practices, make them able to accept BL. Similarly, students' readiness to adopt blended learning is often shaped by their prior experiences with online education. Those with positive experiences tend to show greater enthusiasm for blended learning. The following excerpts highlight this theme:

“I think my knowledge is sufficient enough to teach a course using valid learning because I know how to use the platforms.”(L-03)

“In terms of knowledge and experience, if I may say that I think it is sufficient at the moment because I am able to navigate, to utilize the technology available around me.”(L-06)

“Yes, I have good access to the use of technology because I have laptop since I was in elementary school and I also live at the urban area so I can access to the internet.”(L-05)

Preference Traditional Learning Methods

Accessibility and Clarity

Nevertheless, most educators and students prefer a traditional classroom setting, and benefit from face-to-face interactions. They said that face to face instructions which often provide immediate clarification and support. This direct communication helps to resolve misunderstandings quickly and ensures that instructions are clear and easily followed. This can be seen in the following excerpts:

“Face to face is more engaging.”(L-04)

*“As for efficiency of teaching, I think face to face is serve more, more benefits.”
(L-04)*

“As for me in this private Islamic University, I believe students are more engaged in face to face interaction” (L-03)

“Face to face learning is more effective because I can ask questions directly to the lecturers and it is easier to understand your face to face learning than online learning” (S-01)

“While face to face, I can learn directly and interact with interaction and immediate feedback and a sense of community” (S-03)

“Face to face sessions provide valuable opportunities for direct interaction, discussion and immediate feedback” (S-02)

Conclusion

Apart from the benefits of blended learning, such as providing students with more flexibility and individualized instruction, enabling them to work with materials at their own pace while still benefiting from in-person interactions, there are also challenges that indicates that PIHEIs educator and students favoring traditional face-to-face instruction, as many participants still believe in the effectiveness of conventional methods. Hence, in brief, a careful implementation of blended learning in private Islamic Higher Education Institutions should be conducted in effective ways to ensure acceptance by both educators and students.

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