

Exploring English as a Second Language Educators' Challenges of Teaching Communication Skills in Blended Learning Environments: A Malaysian Scenario

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Abstract

Blended learning approach has been employed in Malaysia as the Ministry of Education gives prominence on the integration of Information, Communication and Technology in teaching and learning dyad as stated in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, tertiary institutions have started to practice the blended learning approach widely in English as a second language education. Numerous social media tools, mobile technologies, learning management systems, and other web-based educational tools have been extensively deployed by English as a second language educators for language teaching and learning process in blended learning classroom. These tools are crucial in blended learning as it is an approach which combines both online and face-to face component after careful consideration. Past literature discussed a lot about combination of the two components, nevertheless, less studies focus on the challenges encountered by the educators in blended learning ESL classroom particularly in teaching communication skills. Thus, this research aims to explore ESL educators' challenges of teaching communication skills in blended learning environments. Data for this study was gathered through an open-ended survey which were participated by ESL educators from public and private higher learning institutions. The findings of this study revealed various significant categorical of themes with regards to the educators' challenges in teaching communication skills using blended learning approach. This research proposed several suggestions for teaching communication skills in blended learning environment at Malaysian tertiary institutions based on the identified challenges. The outcome from this research is substantial to ESL educators to make crucial decisions on the application of blended learning in classroom.

Keywords: Blended Learning; Teaching Communication Skills; Challenges; ESL

Introduction

United Nations has introduced 17 sustainable development goals to improve the world's economy, environment, and societies by 2030. Among all the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), SDG 4 which is quality education is aimed to create better and sustainable education all over the world. In Malaysia, the educational system has experienced a quite number of transformations. This is to ensure there is an alignment between the educational system and the recent advancement in Information,

Communication and Technology (ICT). New curriculums were introduced at the primary and the secondary school levels in 2013. The changes in the curriculum are made due to the impact of ICT which is to prepare the students with 21st century skills. It is quite crucial to have curriculum which assists to equip the learners with the skills needed for 21st century particularly oral communication skills in English language so that they have the confidence and courage to face the challenges at global level. On top of that, students need to make sure they have good English

communication skills as it is one of the most important skills expected by the employers during the job interviews (Pazil & Razak, 2019).

Therefore, Malaysian instructional system has been improved with the incorporation of ICT and approaches so that the students will be able to equip themselves with the 21st century skills including the English communication skills to meet the challenges at the international level. The improvement in nation's instructional system helps to further enhance the teaching and learning process. Efforts such as Smart school project and '1BestariNET' have initiated by Ministry of Education with the consideration of the significance of ICT in 21st century educational changes. The use of educational technologies in classroom instruction has been shown to have a tremendous impact on the educational system at the school level and higher education institution level.

Now, Covid-19 outbreak began to strike international global economy, daily lifestyle including education industry since December 2019 (Atkenson, 2020). As the number of Covid-19 cases as well as the deaths due to the pandemic are still on the rise in Malaysia, the situation is slightly unstable, and it impacts the education system as well. Higher education institutions have been challenged to consider and implement radical new ways to teaching and learning due to this pandemic. The worldwide pandemic has posed problems that have radically altered how higher education institutions work today. More educational technologies are employed in teaching and learning at the higher learning institutions to conduct online learning and blended learning modes.

Educators at higher learning institutions have been widely utilizing technologies in their teaching and learning pedagogy and this includes English as a Second Language educators as well. It is quite crucial for the students to have good proficiency in English language especially in the oral communication skills. Effective oral communication skills is vital for the graduates to express their ideas as well as for their future career development. Past literature indicated lack of English communication skills is one of the prominent factors which contributes to unemployment problem among the Malaysian graduates. Most of the studies (M. Rafiq & Hashim, 2018; Mohd

Hazwan Puad, 2018) stated that communication in English language is the primary skill which is lacking among Malaysian graduates and therefore, they could not be able to secure good jobs in organizations. 81% of the companies stated that lack of communication skills is a significant issue when it comes to graduate unemployment (David & Saeipoor, 2018). 21st-century skills, especially English communication skills, is insufficient among the students who are studying in universities (Fariza et al., 2019; Nadarajah, 2021; Su Hie Ting et al., 2017). The ability to converse well in English language and to speak with a high confidence level is vital for the graduates, especially when it comes to attending job interviews (Subramaniam et al., 2021). All these previous findings depicted that the issue of lacking in 21st-century skills especially oral communication skill in the English language seriously needs to be addressed, and actions should be taken. The significance of English Language proficiency has been emphasized in the Roadmap for English Language Education 2015-2025. This roadmap includes the target expectation of English language proficiency of Malaysian graduates. The graduates who enter the workforce after their graduation are expected to be skillful in English language used in the context of employment.

Apart from the target expectation of English language proficiency, Roadmap for English Language Education 2015-2025 also explained the quality culture in English language education which includes the quality delivery system as one of the main components. Good quality of delivery system ensures the good quality of English language education. Various teaching and learning strategies have been employed with the integration of technologies by English as a second language educators in the process of delivering their language skills lesson particularly oral communication skills. At the present, technology in language context is seen as a great potential in enhancing speaking, listening, writing and reading (Blake, 2017). Blended learning becomes one of the approaches which commonly practiced at the Malaysian higher learning institutions. This is also in line with the 9th shift of Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 whereby the ministry of education initiates latest teaching and learning approaches which integrates ICT.

Face-to-face instruction occurs in classroom while the online instruction is conducted at the outside of the classroom with the use of technologies. During the conventional face-to-face classroom educators will have interactive session with the students. As for the online learning, the students need to search, access, and utilize the online resources prepared by their instructors. Various tools and applications have been utilised by the ESL educators to conduct their lessons on communication in blended learning such as web-based applications, social media tools, mobile applications and so on. Past studies have reported that the implementation of blended learning provides many advantages to the students and the educators (Gumartifa et al., 2020; Hashim et al., 2018; Khairudin et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, the ESL educators encounter with challenges during the implementation of blended learning in classroom (Hamdan et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2020; Kumarasamy et al., 2020; Yeop et al., 2019). The challenges faced by the educators when conducting the blended learning classroom would affect the implementation of blended learning approach in ESL classroom. Appropriate preparation is required when implementing blended learning method with technology support. Moreover, incorporating a blended learning strategy at every stage of instruction is a challenge for Malaysian higher education institutions. Less studies focus on the challenges encountered by the educators in blended learning ESL classroom particularly in teaching communication skills (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019). Thus, this study explores the challenges faced by the ESL educators to teach communication skills in blended learning classroom. The educators who participated in this research were from four different states in Malaysia such as Selangor, Kedah, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang. Responses from all the educators were gathered through an open-ended survey. Hopefully, the information from this chapter would be helpful to reflect the blended learning implementation at higher learning institutions. It is expected that the findings of this study will help ESL educators and the management of higher learning institutions to make important decisions on the application of blended learning in the classroom. This present empirical research was conceptualized and operationalized based on the following precept:

1) What are the key challenges faced by ESL educators to teach oral communication skills in blended learning environment?

Literature Review

Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025

Ministry of Education also has formed Malaysian Education Blueprint for Higher Education 2015-2025 for the purpose of transforming national education system. The focus of Malaysian Education Blueprint is to create student-centred learning with the help of all the 10 shifts. The transformation of the national education system helps to develop the quality of teaching and learning and to create well balanced younger generation who have the skill, knowledge and value. Graduates who have the relevant knowledge, value and the 21st century skills particularly communication skills would be able to compete globally.

Few initiatives have been implemented by Ministry of Education for the purposes of educational shift. All these efforts have been implemented through the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015 – 2025. During the first phase which is from 2013 to 2015, Ministry of Education focused on the basic ICT amenities. This includes ensuring both educators and students to have enough rights in using ICT facilities, providing the proper arrangement to maximize the use of ICT at schools and making sure there is solid ICT literacy skills among the educators. This effort is also in line with the Shift 7 which emphasizes on the use ICT in enhancing learners' achievement. During the second phase which is from 2016 to 2020, a few initiatives to promote the innovative use of ICT in education has been taken by Ministry of Education. Among the initiatives is giving additional opportunities for the schools in the transformation of ICT used in teaching and learning process. Other initiative includes the strategies to improve the current ICT practices in the first phase.

As stated in the 9th shift in Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025, Globalised Online Learning was introduced to encourage the transformation in the education system (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). When

Globalised Online Learning emerged, new teaching and learning approach was introduced too which integrates face to face learning and online learning. Instructional technology innovation, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) and integrated learning principles such as blended learning are the basis of the 9th shift. 21st century pedagogical has been suggested by Malaysian of Higher Education as a new approach in teaching and learning to improve national educational system. Subsequently, blended learning has been recommended as a new pedagogical approach. Blended learning is employed in educational context as the technology can be assessed both inside and outside the classroom and the magnification of the ICT potential for teaching and learning dyad. Besides, blended learning also can be one of the best options for the current situation which is affected by Covid-19 pandemic. The implementation of social distancing procedures due to the pandemic of Covid-19 made the delivery and imparting of education became difficult and the contact between social groups and individuals has been restricted. As the educationists and policymakers need to design efficient methods and means of communication between instructors and students under such social and pandemic situations, what is left to make the most of it is current technology. Thus, blended learning could be the effective approach to be used in this pandemic situation as it promotes active learning process among the students through the amalgamation of face to face to face and online learning.

Definition of blended learning

Blended learning, also called as hybrid learning, has emerged as a result of the extensive use of technology in education, as well as the growing prominence of online learning in recent years (Norman et al., 2018). Blended learning is the intentional combination of face-to-face training and computer-mediated online instruction with the goal of improving the learning process (Boelens et al., 2017). Prior to the introduction of the word "blended learning" in higher education, the term "hybrid learning" was commonly used; nevertheless, both terms are now interchangeable (Graham et al., 2019).

Blended learning in ESL context

In today's digital era, the use of ICT or technology in ESL language classroom has been notified for the development of the four main language skills namely speaking, listening, reading and writing (Blake, 2017; Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017). Literature depicted that the integration of ICT in teaching and learning is vital in enhancing the students' overall language learning achievement (Akbarov et al., 2018; Bakar et al., 2017). Therefore, the word technology has become very common in the education field and now the utilization of blended learning has become very familiar among the ESL educators at the higher learning institutions. Blended learning approach in ESL context can provide advantages to both educators and learners. This has been proved by the findings based on the past studies. Educators who teach blended courses get the chance to access a wide range of online resources which are suitable to the students' level of knowledge and skills. Most importantly, blended learning courses assist the educators to manage their time effectively and help them to look for collaboration opportunities.

As for the students, participating in blended learning classroom helps to increase their enthusiasm towards learning. Apart from that, blended learning also guides the students to become balanced graduates as it assists them to enhance their language skills, future ready skills as required by the employers particularly communication skills. (A. H. Ibrahim & Alwi, 2017; Thambu et al., 2021). Learners in the blended learning paradigm have greater opportunity to communicate and interact in English with their educators and other students. These chances are made feasible by the e-learning portal's use of chat and discussion boards as a communication tool. Students can use the forum to start the discussion or ask a question and speak with their teachers and peers in English outside of the classroom. Furthermore, blended learning has been shown to boost learners' participation and engagement (Adams et al., 2020). Some students could be hesitant or afraid to engage in a traditional face-to-face classroom, but they may find the online platform to be a non-threatening avenue for them.

Social Constructivism

Among the most prominent philosophers and educators associated with constructivism are

Piaget, Blumer, Kuhn, von Glasersfeld, and Vygotsky. The theory of constructivism is related to online learning as this is more to learner centric. This theory allows the learners to study and to control their learning process at their own pace. The most significant assumption of constructivism is learners construct their own meaning from what they learned. The constructivist paradigm is grounded by the concept that reality is created during the communication with peers and the environment. Thus, the core emphasis in a constructivist course to foster the knowledge construction and the thinking skills among the learners (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that students are involved in deep learning when they have social interaction with the other students and educators in online environment. When the learners have more interactions with others, it will change the way on how they interpret. Employing social constructivism as the theoretical lens for this study enables the researchers to seek how do the learners interpret and make meaning during the implementation of blended learning approach by their educators. This will also help to relate with the challenges encountered by the educators in blended learning classroom.

Community of Inquiry

Garrison et al., (2000) created the online Community of Inquiry (CoI) model. The CoI model was created to assist them make sense of the challenges they were facing with their new online graduate programme, which included computer-based discussion boards. Because the pedagogy of online discussion forums presupposes that students will collaborate rather than work individually a new theoretical model was required to explain and investigate the virtual educational experience. As a result, the CoI framework was established. Furthermore, an online community of inquiry is defined as a "collection of individuals who collaborate to generate personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding through purposeful critical dialogue and reflection" (D. R. Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Meaningful online is viewed through the CoI paradigm. Learning takes place at the crossroads of three supportive elements. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is based on John Dewey's concept of practical inquiry and it is social constructivism. It's a dynamic process model for defining, describing,

and measuring factors that help online learning communities grow. The CoI approach identifies three key elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence.

Learners' capability to project their personal qualities into the community of inquiry, is known as social presence (Garrison et al., 2000). Computer conferencing and other instructional media encourage high levels of engagement among students and between students and teachers. As a result, they promote models of teaching and learning that are interactive in nature and consistent with the communicative principles of university education. Due to the potential and the widespread use of computer conferencing in higher education, the three writers developed a Community of Inquiry model that combines pedagogical principles with the instructional and benefits of computer conferencing (Garrison et al., 2000).

The design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of achieving meaningful learning outcomes is defined as teaching presence (D. R. Garrison et al., 2001). Setting curriculum and procedures, as well as facilitating group discussion, are indicators of recognizable teaching presence. Educators must be knowledgeable and flexible to develop a community of inquiry. He was also conscious of the importance of facilitating suitable social relationships by organizing the social environment of the classroom. Teaching presence is defined in the CoI framework as "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes with the purpose of creating meaningful learning outcomes" (D. R. Garrison et al., 2001).

The level to which learners can create and verify meaning through sustained thought and discourse is referred as cognitive presence (D. R. Garrison et al., 2001). Puzzlement, information sharing, connecting ideas, and application of new ideas are all indicators of cognitive present. Although evidence of practical inquiry has been found in online conversation, preliminary investigations of cognitive presence indicated that the majority of postings in an online discussion forum focused on the exploration phase (D. R. Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Several research in this field have demonstrated that online forum inquiry rarely progresses

beyond the exploratory stage (Kanuka & Anderson, 1998) Thus, a community of inquiry must have clear expectations about the nature of critical discussion and the kind of postings that will be made. The difference between facilitation and direction must also be transparent based on the design perspective.

Methods

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges encountered by the ESL educators to teach communication skills in blended learning classroom. Qualitative methodology was employed in this study to collect the relevant data pertaining to ESL educators' challenges towards teaching communication skills in blended learning environment. As this research emphasizes on the educators' issues and challenges of teaching communication skills in ESL blended learning classroom, a qualitative methodology is employed. Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to understand the participants' challenges and issues on a certain phenomenon based on their behavior and culture (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

Sampling method and size

One of the crucial aspects in a qualitative inquiry is to select the participants who can clearly provide the important details related to the research. Participants who involved in a qualitative research must have the characteristics that reflect the objective of the study so that they can provide the relevant and meaningful information about the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2009).

f language departments from Malaysian tertiary institutions were approached by phone calls. These tertiary institutions consist of Selangor, Pahang, Kedah and Negeri Sembilan. Among the six head of language departments, three were from public institutions and the other three were from private higher learning institutions. All of them were given explanation on the purpose of the research and the main selection criteria for choosing the participants which is to have at least 3 years experiences of teaching in blended learning environment. As this study employed open-ended survey, the link for the survey was shared with the head of the departments so that they can share the survey link to their academic

staffs. Responses from 25 participants were obtained after waited for few weeks. However, out of 25 responses only 17 responses were selected for the study because the rest were from educators who have less than 3 years of teaching in blended learning classroom. Among the 17 participants, 12 were female and 5 were male educators. Based on the participants demographic information, 3 of them have 10-15 years of blended teaching experiences, 5 of them have 5-10 years of experience teaching in blended learning classroom and 9 of the participants have less than 5 years of blended teaching experience. Among the 9 participants, 5 of them have 4 years of teaching experience and 4 of them have 3 years in teaching in blended environment. Therefore, all the educators involved have sufficient expertise incorporating blended learning into their everyday lessons.

The researchers used purposive sampling for this study. Although the researchers employed open-ended survey, there is one criterion that has been set for the participants. This criterion has been included in the first section of the survey questions. The participants must have experiences in teaching in blended learning classrooms. Only the participants who have blended teaching experiences would be able to provide and explain the meaningful responses related to the challenges face by the educators in teaching communication skills in blended learning classroom.

Research instruments and procedures

As Covid-19 pandemic has restricted the contact between individuals and social groups, an open-ended survey was developed using Google Form and was distributed by the researcher to gather the information for this research. Open-ended questions do not only assist the researcher to elicit useful perceptions from the participants, but it also helps the participants to comprehend the researcher's questions before reaching the final answers (Singer & Couper, 2017). Besides, open-ended questions allow participants to think on any significant information related to the phenomenon. Preconceived notions about any aspect of blended learning challenges, which could represent the examiners' knowledge, could be avoided in this way. As a result, the probable answers gained from the open-ended questions can shed light on the nature of the educators' challenges in blended

learning environment and assist the researchers in gaining a deeper understanding of the scenario (Prodanović & Gavranović, 2021). Cohen et al (2011) stated open-ended questions not only capture the uniqueness of a scenario, but they also allow participants to write their ideas in their own words, to clarify and justify their responses, and to avoid the limits of pre-defined response categories.

There were two sections in the open-ended survey. The first section (Part A) was allocated to obtain some demographic details (gender, years of teaching experience and years of teaching experience in blended learning environment) and the second part (Part B) consists of the open-ended questions which are focused on understanding ESL educators' challenges in teaching communication skills in blended learning classroom. Part A is crucial to know whether the educators have enough teaching experiences in blended learning environment. This is because only those who are having sufficient teaching experience in blended learning environment can provide valuable input about the phenomenon. The questions from Part B is used to elicit the participants' meaningful experiences teaching in blended learning classroom. Four people (two educators and two experts) have been referred for the purpose of validating open-ended questions. To enhance the validity of the instrument of the study, the open-ended questions were piloted with two educators. These two educators are tertiary institutions lecturers who have 5 to 10 years of teaching experience in blended learning classroom. Pilot studies are frequently related with a quantitative method of evaluating a research instrument. The significance of pilot work appears to have been extended to qualitative inquiry, where it is carried out as part of the preparation for the big study (Majid et al., 2017). It can be used to address potential practical concerns in research procedures (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002) as well as testing the questions. On top of that, the researcher turned to two experts who have extensive experiences in the area of language and technology to obtain the comments on the open-ended questions in the survey. These two experts are Phd holders and currently working in established tertiary institutions. They have comprehensive background in both language area and technology area and thus they were chosen to validate the open-ended questions.

Changes were made in terms of the structure of questions based on the feedback from the two educators and the two experts before sharing the link for the online open-ended survey.

Validity and Reliability

Triangulation using multiple sources of data was used to enhance the validity and the reliability of the responses from the open-ended survey. This type of triangulation refers to collecting responses from people with different perspectives (Denzin, 1978). The responses for the open-ended survey were obtained from the participants of two types of higher learning institutions which are private and public institutions. Another method which was used to increase the validity and the reliability of the findings is through reducing the researchers' bias. In this context of study, bias refers to the existing assumptions of the researchers on the phenomenon being studied. The researchers have eliminated their assumptions, biases and perspective on the ESL educators' challenges implementing blended learning in teaching communication skills (Maxwell, 2009) during the data analysis process. This has been done by reading and analyzing the participants' responses with clear mind to make sure the presuppositions are avoided (Merriam, 2009).

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the online open-ended survey was analyzed by employing the six stages of thematic analysis by (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The six stages of thematic analysis consists of data familiarization, initial codes generation, themes search, potential themes review, themes defining and naming process and lastly report production. Clarke & Braun (2013) described that thematic analysis as a method of recognizing and categorizing the pattern emerged based on qualitative data and followed by the process of constructing themes according to the data.

All the responses to the open-ended survey were transferred to the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (Atlas.Ti 8) for the purpose of data management and organization. Since the researchers developed the survey using Google Form, it was not necessary to transcribe the responses from the survey. Google Form has a function whereby the researcher just simply downloaded all the responses in CSV file. Then, the responses have

been transferred to Word document before transferred to Atlas.Ti. classification in Atlas.Ti 8 made the procedure of sorting to become easier and more systematized. The first round of coding produced 79 initial codes. Then, the codes were categorized into several themes to answer the research question on “What are the key challenges faced by ESL educators to teach communication skills in blended learning environment?”. This resulted to a final of 5 main significant themes to answer the research question.

Findings

Research Question: What are the key challenges faced by ESL educators to teach oral communication skills in blended learning environment?

This section presents the findings and the discussion based on the themes emerged during the analysis of the open-ended responses. Themes were produced after the process of coding and categorization of the codes. The five themes which emerged from the thematic analysis were challenges in terms of pedagogy, issues related to facilities, insufficient of training and courses for educators, limitation of several learning platforms, and lack of student engagement. These are the challenges which have been highlighted by the ESL educators when teaching oral communication skills in blended learning classroom.

Challenges in terms of teaching pedagogy

Based on the thematic analysis of the open-ended responses, one of the challenges which has been identified was in terms of teaching pedagogy. Figure 1 shows the network on the challenges in terms of teaching pedagogy. Participants of the study stated that they are having problems in terms of choosing the right and suitable technology to be employed when teaching oral communication skills in blended learning classroom. Participant 9 stated that she is having issues in selecting the right communication material and content for online classes (*“Finding the right material, content to be used for online classes”*). Due to the rapid enhancement in educational technologies, there are variety of applications and communication

tools which are available for the educators, however some of the educators might have lack of knowledge on which application or tool that can be applied in blended learning classroom. Participant 14, on the other hand mentioned that technology is not properly or successfully integrated in lesson, activities, and assignments as they are just merely seen as means or tools (*“lesson/activity/assignment could be designed better where proper integration of technology is applied and made immersive, rather than just looking at the use of technology as a means/too”*). Educators require specific skills so that they are able to select the appropriate material and content for online communication teaching (Kundu, 2018). Other than that, Participant 13 responded that she is facing issue in balancing face-to-face teaching and online teaching communication in blended learning classroom (*“to balance between ftf and ol”*).

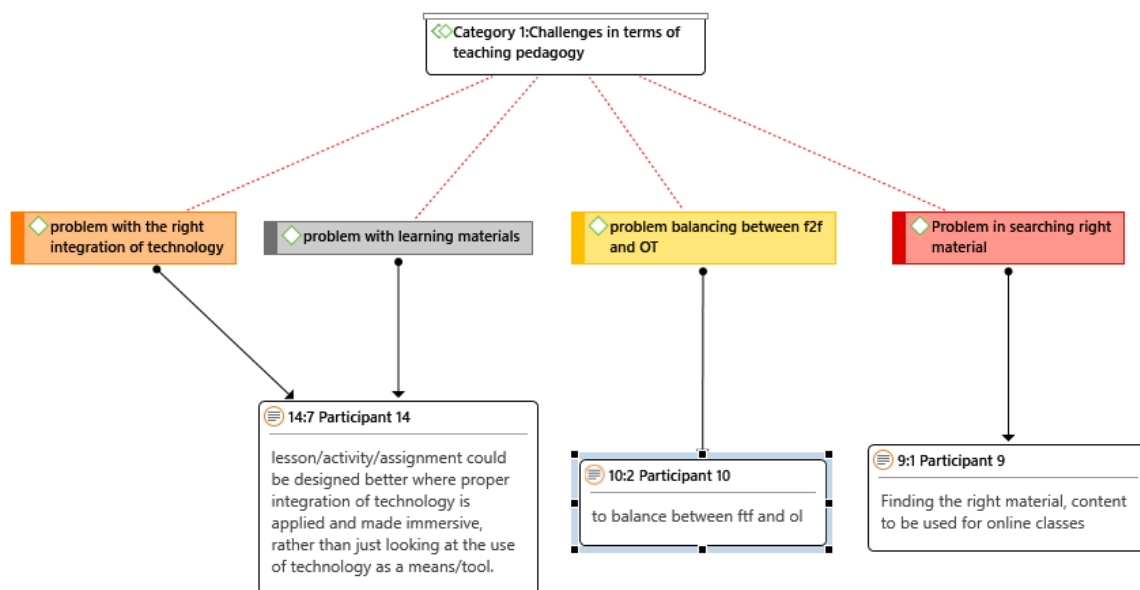


Figure 1. Network on the Challenges in terms of Teaching Pedagogy

Issue related to facilities

Figure 2 depicts the network diagram related to facilities. Issues related to facilities is another popular challenge which was highlighted by the educators who participated in the online open-ended survey. Poor internet connectivity, poor facilities and unfamiliarity with the tools and software are among the specific problems which mentioned by the participants. Problems related to facilities lead to ineffective implementation of blended learning (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019; Hamdan et al., 2017; Hamouda, 2018; Oweis, 2018). Internet connectivity seem like the main problem faced by the ESL educators when conducting communication lesson in blended learning classroom. Participant 1 ("they too experience connectivity issues"), Participant 8 ("they faced various problem such as poor internet connection"), and Participant 15 ("Connectivity issues from the students") of the open-ended survey accentuated that technical access to internet is not only encountered by the educators, but it is also a common problem among the students as well. When there is an issue of accessing to the internet, it affects the whole implementation of blended learning in the communicative classroom. Participant 4 added poor internet connection, poor equipment and devices were other problems emphasized related to facilities ("better facilities like equipment, devices, strong internet connection, etc."). Since

blended learning is associated with computer equipment and technologies, high quality facilities are needed to make sure efficient implementation of the approach in communicative ESL classroom (S. Ibrahim & Ismail, 2021).

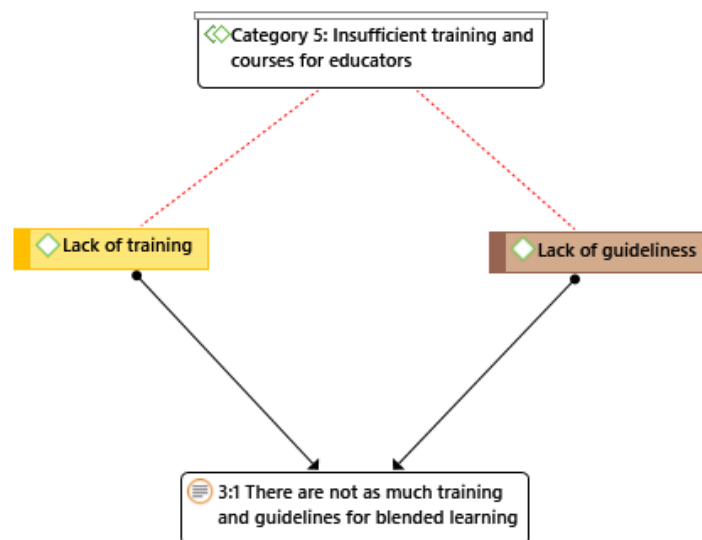


Figure 3. Network on the Insufficient Training and Courses for Educators

Limitation of several learning platforms

Educators who participated in the online open-ended survey highlighted limitation of learning platforms as one of the issues that encounter when teaching communication skills in blended learning classroom. Most of the higher learning institutions have developed their own virtual learning platforms for the purpose of teaching and learning. These virtual learning platforms are utilized by the educators for the purpose of uploading and sharing learning materials, notes, assignments, and other relevant tasks for the students. As for the purpose of teaching speaking skills, learning management system is utilized to upload communication related videos. At times, students are given communication tasks and required to upload their recorded videos. These learning platforms are used by the students when they have non face to face classroom. Based on the analysis of the open-ended survey, some participants have expressed their dissatisfaction towards the virtual learning platforms. Participant 5 have stated that the learning system that they have at their institutions are not very user-friendly (“The blended learning platform provided by the institution is not as user friendly as it should”). This is also supported by participant 6 (“*platform that is not user friendly*”) and participant 8 (“*students tend to have problems to get themselves familiar with the platforms used*

in class”). Other than that, these participants also have mentioned that at times students are having issues too when utilizing these platforms in classroom. The issue related to limitation of learning platforms has been discussed in (Holmes & Rodriguez, 2018) as well.

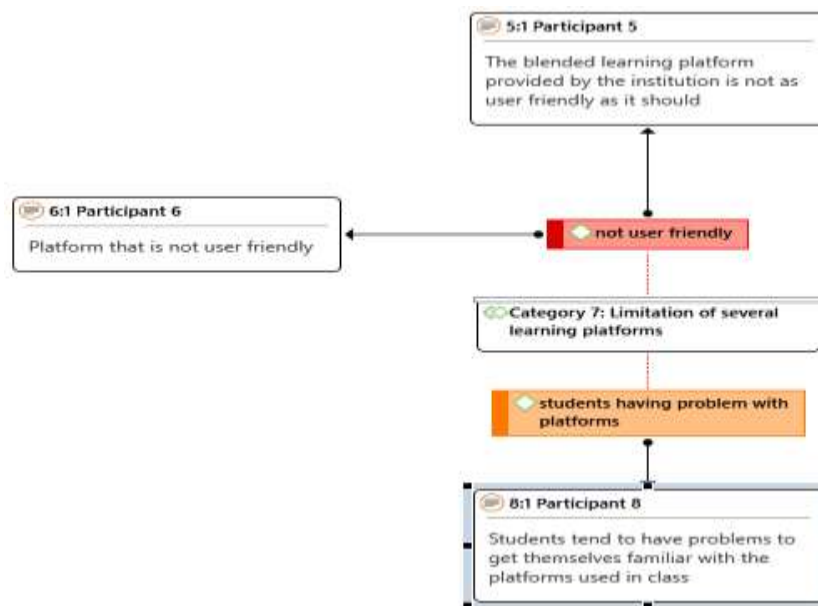


Figure 4. Network on Limitation on Several Learning Platform

Lack of student engagement

Majority of the participants have accentuated lack of student engagement as another challenge that they encounter most of the time when conducting communication lesson in blended learning environment. There were quite number of problems highlighted by the participants related to lack of student engagement. One of the obvious problems which was highlighted by majority of the participants was of commitment. *“lack/low participation, unwillingness to participate, hard to get students to give commitment”* are some of the responses provided by the participants in the open-ended survey. This indicated that educators are having challenges in terms of obtaining the full commitment from students especially during the online speaking session with them.

Participant 4 has mentioned that it is very difficult to get the immediate feedback from the students during the class (*“It was hard to obtain immediate feedback from students as they need time and can hide behind camera”*). Furthermore, Participant 11 has stated that based on the blended learning strategies she used only some of the students have shown their willingness to speak (*“blended learning strategies I used have shown a fraction of students' willingness to speak using the English language openly with me...30%”*). This is also

supported by Participant 4 when she mentioned students have become passive due to shyness and low confidence level (*“What I noticed when teaching them last semester was they became more passive...for those who are shy, or low confidence level”*). *“those who are proficient or high confidence level tend to overshadow those passive students”*, *“lack of attention span in online class”*, *“problem with student attitude”* are among the other concerns of the participants. It can be said that the result from this study is quite different as compared to other research which the findings revealed that blended learning enhances the students' engagement (Adams et al., 2020; Sahni, 2019; Setiyani et al., 2019). However, more challenging activities need to be designed by the educators to improve the students' engagement in ESL communicative classroom.

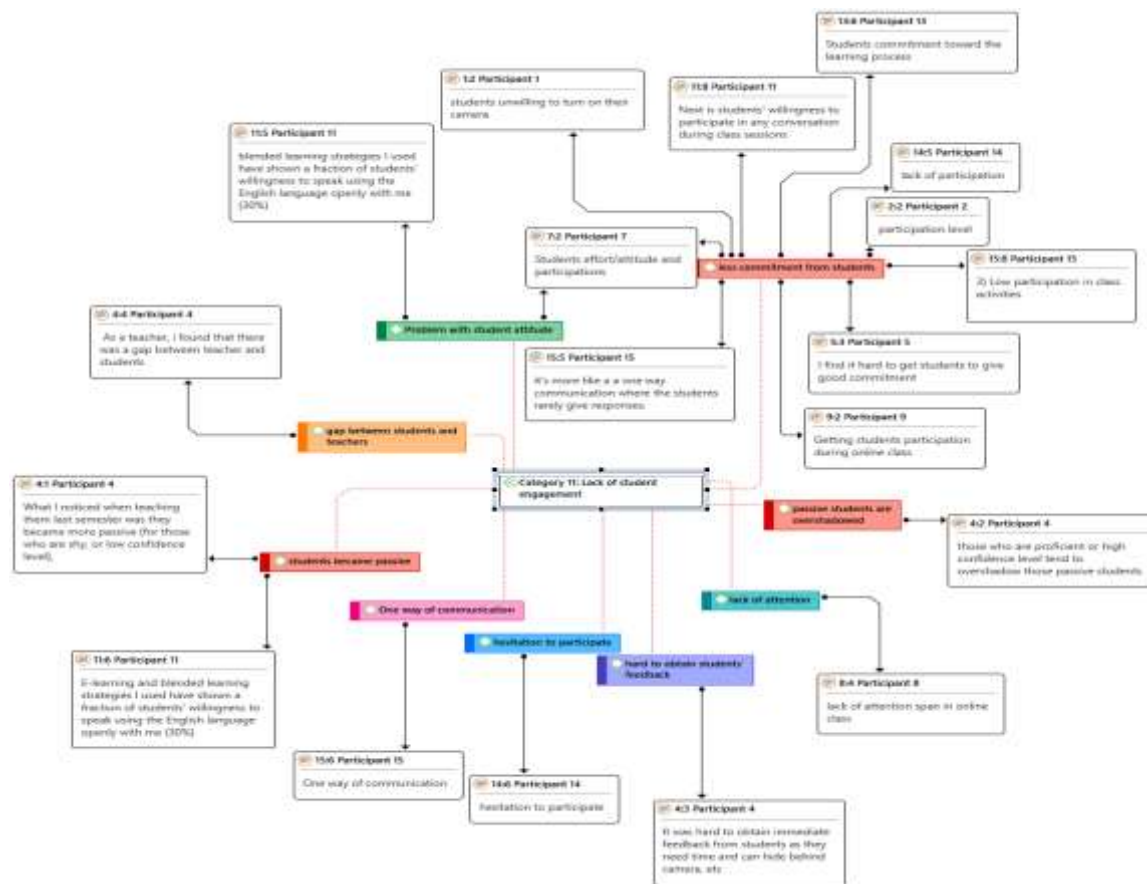


Figure 5. Network on Lack of Student Engagement

Discussions

The three major findings which obtained from this study were lack of student engagement, challenges in terms of pedagogy and issues related to facilities. Majority of the participants associated the issue of lack of student engagement with less commitment, low confidence level in English speaking and passive. This finding seems slightly different as compared to the findings which have been indicated in the current literature such as (Adams et al., 2020; Sahni, 2019; Setiyani et al., 2019). All these researchers have conducted studies on blended learning and learner engagement and the findings revealed the implementation of blended learning enhanced the level of engagement among the students. The finding of this study also contrasts with the concept of social presence in Community of Inquiry (CoI) model by R. Garrison et al., (2000) which stated the use of computer conferencing and other technologies promotes the

engagement level among the students. The difference between the findings of this current and past studies could be associated with the materials and tasks used in the blended learning classroom. Materials such as infographics and online assessment attracted students to engage more and be more motivated in blended learning classroom (Jerry & Yunus, 2021; Pazilah & Hashim, 2018).

Challenges in terms of pedagogy was another issue highlighted by the ESL educators in the findings. Based on the responses obtained from the open-ended questions, many participants revealed that they have difficulties in balancing online and face to face teaching. The others responded that they are facing problems in choosing the right integration of technologies and searching for the suitable materials to be utilized in blended learning classroom. When R. Garrison et al., (2000) explained about teaching presence in CoI, they have mentioned that educators must have the right knowledge and be

flexible so that they can create Community of Inquiry. Lack of knowledge and training on blended learning among the ESL educators could affect their teaching practice. Bruggeman et al., (2021) advocated that it is necessary to have a thorough awareness and knowledge of the pedagogical concept for an efficient blended learning implementation. The last major finding which was emphasized by the participants in the findings section was issues related to the facilities. Unfamiliarity with the tools and software was the most significant problem mentioned by the educators. This can be related with the insufficient training and course among the educators pertaining to blended learning implementation. Issues on tools and software impedes the effective implementation of blended learning (Hamdan et al., 2017)

Conclusion

To conclude, this study aimed to explore the challenges faced by the ESL educators when teaching communication skills in blended learning classroom. The analysis of the findings shed the light on some issues of five main challenges namely challenges in terms of pedagogy, issues related to facilities, insufficient of training and courses for educators, limitation of several learning platforms, and lack of student engagement. All these challenges need to be rectified to ensure the effective implementation of blended learning for the purpose of teaching communication skills. The roles and responsibility of the Malaysian tertiary institutions are deemed crucial in providing good and stable internet service, equipment, tools, and devices to implement successful and meaningful blended learning. On top of that, consistent trainings and courses for the educators are vital in providing new knowledge and skills on the current technologies employed to facilitate the implementation of blended learning. Educators would be more self-assured and well-organized when it came to planning and delivering when they have clear understanding on the implementation of blended learning. This would exceptionally assist and improve the educators to design and deliver appropriate and interesting blended learning content to increase the engagement level among the students. In addition to that, IT infrastructure and other computer equipment should be

observed at a regular basis to facilitate the educators in conducting communicative blended learning classroom.

Since there are lots of prospects to be offered by blended learning in the field of education, more future research needs to be conducted. This study focused only several Malaysian higher learner institutions in getting the qualitative responses from the participants. Future studies may also emphasize on a wider scope of tertiary institutions by employing mixed methods so that both quantitative and qualitative responses can be obtained on the educators' challenges in conducting communicative lesson in blended learning. Other suggestion for future study includes the educators' blended learning experience in teaching the four major English language skills in tertiary classroom. It is quite challenging to promote the blended learning implementation in tertiary institutions. This approach is crucial in improving the quality of effective practices among the community of higher learning institutions. The result of this study will be very much substantial to the ESL educators as they must make crucial decisions on the application of blended learning strategies in ESL classroom. Besides, the findings of this qualitative study would be beneficial to the tertiary institutions management as they need to play their significant roles in addressing the educators' challenges especially the ones related to the internet facilities, tools and technologies needed to conduct blended learning classrooms (S. Ibrahim & Ismail, 2021).

Blended learning implementation has a great potential to bring new dimensions in ESL education. On top of that, blended learning becomes one of the seamless teaching and learning approaches which is highly implemented by Malaysian higher learning institutions at this current pandemic of Covid-19. In today's pandemic situation where everything needs to be done remotely including teaching and learning process, tertiary institutions opted for blended learning approach as it can help to reduce the contact between the members of the educational institutions by integrating technology. Blended learning opens a great opportunity to have a smooth sailing in deliverance of lesson from educators to students during current pandemic situation. Thus, it is quite pertinent to ameliorate the strategies to address all the issues and challenges related to

blended learning so that it can ascertain the successful implementation of communication teaching in ESL blended learning classroom. This study hoped to gain meaningful insights into educators' challenges on teaching communication skills in English as a Second Language context. This effort would contribute to the body of knowledge as there were limited studies related to the challenges experienced by the educators in blended learning mainly in ESL tertiary classrooms. The educators' voices and challenges were heard and documented in this chapter through the open-ended questions unlike the past literature which used interviews. All in all, the initiative of implementing blended learning at higher education institutions does not only help to accomplish the ninth shift of Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 which emphasizes on learner-centered learning and national education system transformation, but it also contributes to both pandemic and non-pandemic situation.

Conflict of Interest

None

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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