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Students' Challenges in the Mandarin Classroom: A Blended Learning Experience

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of study was to investigate the challenges of implementing the blended learning approach in Mandarin classes in a public university. A quantitative approach was used to analyze the data collected through an open-ended questionnaire. A total of 112 respondents were selected from students who were enrolled Mandarin course. The results indicated that the internet connectivity were the biggest challenges faced by blended mode students in Mandarin classes followed by technical glitches and human factors. A number of suggestions were highlighted by the respondents to improve the blended learning system.

Keywords: Student-challenges; Blended learning; Mandarin class

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INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, several definition and discussion about blended learning. The most popular definition is that blended learning is a combination of face-to-face and online delivery mode. (Bliuc, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007; Green et al, 2006; Jonas & Burns, 2010; Marsh, Pountney & Prigg, 2008; Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, & Francis, 2006).

For the teaching of Mandarin, students have face-to-face sessions and various mode of blended learning weekly. The students use “i-Learn” as a platform to receive course material uploaded by the instructor. Course material and information included slideshow, videos, quizzes, announcements at i-Learn. Hence, students are to access online course materials and learn mandarin thru i-Learn platform. They have to complete the respective tasks in groups. They need to answer the question, which include giving examples, filling in the blanks. Students are given 2 weeks to submit their assignments. Lecturers will check these assignments and provide answers and feedback.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will discuss the definitions of the key words so that the reader will be clear about the topic discussed.

Educational institutions make use of information and communication technology (ICT) through various course software to deliver course modules. Blended learning is defined as the combination of traditional face-to-face teaching and online teaching. (Bliuc, 2007, p233). Blended learning is being developed to deliver course content. (Wade, 2012). In blended learning, learning materials are transferred through the internet or electronically. The principle behind blended learning is that it is assessable anywhere and anytime.

Blended learning means integrating the online and face-to face dimensions. (Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby & Higgins, 2012) to create more effective learning experiences. (Brew, 2008). Student experience is important for teaching and learning. (Ginns & Ellis, 2009).

Mason and Rennie include combinations of technology, locations and pedagogical approaches into blended learning. (Mason & Rennie, 2006). Graham describes blended learning as a combination of human interaction with Information and Communication Technology-based setting (Graham, 2006).

Challenges

Many studies were conducted on integrating blended learning for university courses. Based on the related studies, the challenges faced when using blended learning can be divided into several categories.

Internet Connectivity and Technical Glitches

Despite the use of technology in higher education courses which have increased rapidly, there are still failures of some sort reported. According to Faith (2017), Abdul Wahid et al. (2013) and Margaret (2013) findings, technical glitches and internet connection are the biggest challenge in blended learning courses.

Students often reported the bandwidth difficulties caused them to fail to progress in their blended learning sessions. Students were unable to access PDF files, video clips, took long time to re-connect or log in to the system (Joel & Christina, 2013). Ineffective systems or poor online designs were a barrier and may reduce students' confidence and enthusiasm to engage with blended learning courses (Margerat, 2013). Students will be demotivated due to the poor internet connectivity; and is a hindrance to student participation in their online contexts.

Other technical glitches include disruption of electricity, difficulty in following teacher's online instructions (Abeer, 2014) and insufficiency of computer labs (Abdul Wahid et. al, 2013).

Human Factor

Learners' satisfaction is one of the crucial factors that affect the effectiveness of blended learning (Jen-Her et. al, 2010). Paul & Robert (2007) have found that learner satisfaction is closely related to the quality of learning. Students with positive perceptions tend to experience a higher quality of online learning compared to the other students.

Students with low persistence or low inclination are usually less focused on critical, higher level thinking and tend to fail to progress in blended learning sessions (Margaret, 2013). In Abdul Wahid et. al (2013) research showed that students who lack technical skills feel very challenged to access online course materials. This situation may relate to students social economic background, their unwillingness to be independent or to take risks (Abeer, 2014).

Besides that, some student's reported they experiencing feelings of frustration, confusion and social isolation. This is because the online platform had minimized real contact with classmates (Jen-Her et. al, 2010). Students lose their sense of classroom community due to ineffective communication and lack of immediate online feedback from instructors (Faith, 2017). This may create confusion to students as they experienced being isolate and lacked belonging to any group (Abeer, 2014).

Paul and Robert's (2007) findings showed that receiving too much or too little online feedback may reduce students' interest in blended learning course matters. Large volumes of course materials gave students a false sense of security, increased the difficulty of student's work and discouraged students. (Lynn et. al, 2014). Plagiarism and fraud were other factors that reduced students' participation in online tasks (Abdul Wahid et. al, 2013).

In addition, instructor's resistance to technology also affected the effectiveness of blended learning. According to Lynn et. al (2014) findings showed instructors' reluctant to use blended learning due to inadequate support or training in developing online materials. This lacks of support burdens instructors' workloads and students could easily compare teacher's course materials. Besides that, some of the teachers lack expertise and experience in developing quality

online materials and fail to link blended learning with institutional strategies (Patsy et. al. 2013). Joel & Christina (2013) research indicates some of the instructors do not update learning resources on time.

Institutional Challenges

The challenges faced by the universities and departments included too little time to design appropriate online content, limited budget to create a successful online system, and they need to ensure all online content is aligned with the course's syllabus and monitoring course progress (Manjot, 2013).

Patsy et.al (2013) finding showed that the university management faced challenges to align blended learning with institutional strategies. This is caused by many administrators and instructors who are not familiar or even no experience in implementing blended learning.

Another finding showed that online learning needed high initial costs for systems maintenance in order to provide learning support (Jen-Her et. al, 2010). A blended learning system also needs a support unit which can meet the requirements that exist and help it to expand (Pasty at. el, 2013). The university management may have found it difficult in maintaining a smooth and successful blended learning session due to financial constraints.

The significance of this study help institutions knowing students' view and suggestions helps lecturers to evaluate the teaching and learning process, and it would enhance students' learning.

METHOD

Research Questions

- 1) What are the students' perceptions regarding the challenges of implementing the blended learning in Mandarin class?
- 2) What are students' suggestions to enhance and increase the quality of blended learning?

Sample

This quantitative study focused on challenges faced by students in learning Mandarin as a third language in a public university. The respondents were selected based on convenience sampling as they were accessible to the researchers in the university. A total of 112 students from Faculty of Computer Science and Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies were invited to take part in a research on their Mandarin blended learning experience, they were asked to filled out the questionnaire at the end of semester.

The questionnaire used in this study adapted and modified from Abdul Wahed (2013), Paul Ginns, R.Ellis (2007) and consisted 3 parts of questions. Part A collected data regarding the students' background information. Part B consist Likert-type questions and focused on challenges faced by students in blended Mandarin Classes. Descriptive statistics and frequency analyses of Blended learning Experience Questionnaire are discussed to explore the ways students responded to the items. The last part of questionnaire aim to collect students' suggestions and challenges. An open-ended question was used to collect more variety of suggestions (Chua, 2006). Data collected through this questionnaire was analyzed by Cronbach's Alpha to ensure the reliability of results.

DISCUSSION

Challenges

Challenges faced by students of Mandarin blended learning classes

This section examines students' responses to the questions of their blended learning experience. Challenges faced by students during implementing blended learning in Mandarin class included internet connectivity problems, technical glitches and human factors.

From the Table 1 and the following tables, the mean and standard deviation are given, as well as the percentage of students who responded with "Strongly Disagree"(SDA), "Disagree"(DA), "Neutral"(N), "Agree"(A) and "Strongly Agree" (SA).

Table 1
 Descriptive statistics for Internet connectivity

Item	Mean	S.D	Likert Scale Responses (%)				
			SDA	DA	N	A	SA
I was satisfied with the quality of internet connection	3.45	0.97	2.7	11.6	38.4	33	14.3
I can reach the web environment wherever I want	3.63	0.99	0.9	14.3	25	40.2	19.6
I can access to network easily	3.69	0.83	1.8	3.6	33	47.3	14.3

According to the result, Cronbach's alpha for internet connectivity was 0.69. "I can access to network easily" rated the highest with mean of (3.69) followed by "I can reach the web environment wherever I want" with mean of (3.63), "I was satisfied with the quality of internet connection" (3.45).

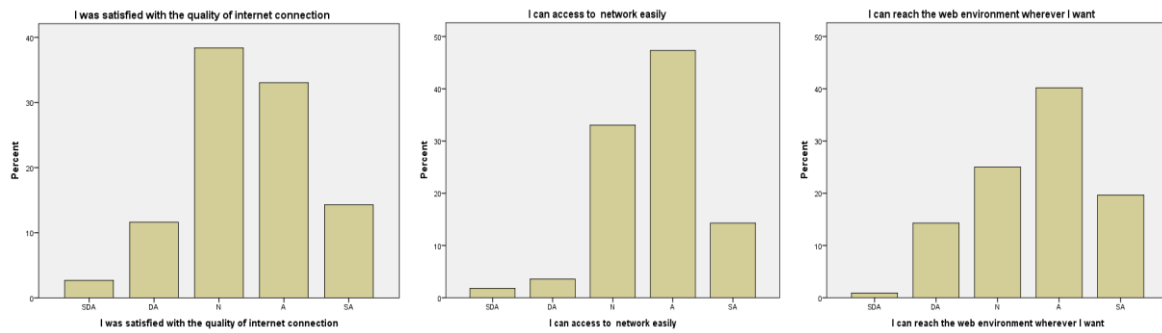


Fig.1 Internet connectivity

Some students reported that slow internet connection or bandwidth difficulties caused them hard to connect to the internet, failed to progress their blended session. When the server is down, it will caused most of the documents, video clips, animations and power point slides failed to download and upload. The most affected students were those who needed to upload their assignments within specific date.

0.9% students strongly disagreed and 14.3% students disagreed that “I can reach the web environment wherever I want”. Some students who live outside of campus have limitation to access to the network. Blended learning needs internet to access; students are not able to do mandarin blended learning without internet connection. 1.8% students strongly disagreeD, 3.6% disagreed that “I can access to the network easily”.

Table 2
 Descriptive statistics for technical glitches

Item	Mean	S.D	Likert Scale Responses (%)				
			SDA	DA	N	A	SA
The online teaching materials are extremely good at explaining things.	3.31	0.97	3.6	14.3	40.2	31.3	10.7
Sharing and discussion in the online environment works well.	3.46	0.9	1.8	11.6	35.7	40.2	10.7
I find the website design quite clear	3.62	0.85	0	10.7	29.5	46.4	13.4

According to the result, Cronbach’s alpha for technical glitches was 0.775. “I find the website quiet clear” rated the highest with mean of (3.62) followed by “sharing and discussion in the online works well” with mean of (3.46).

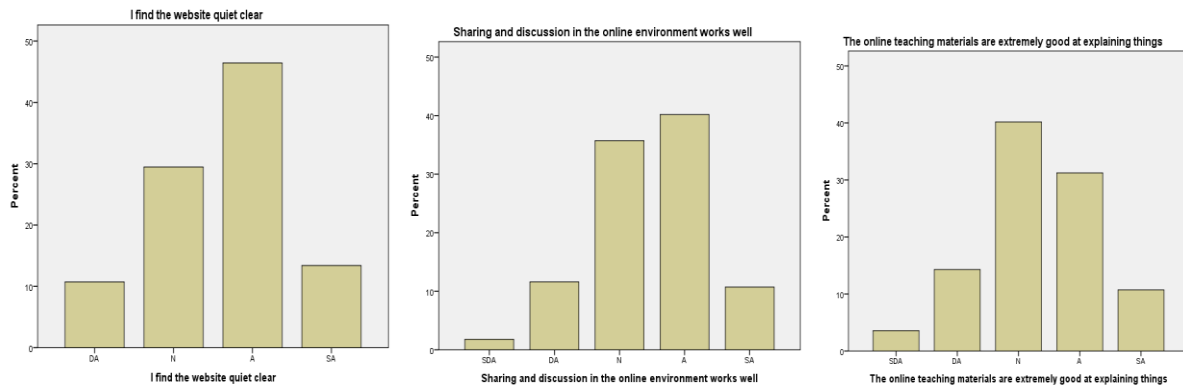


Fig. 2 Technical glitches

Students’ response to item in table 2(technical glitches) were positive. Respondents were generally positive about the website design was quite clear (46.4% agree ; 13.4% strongly agree), “The online teaching materials are extremely good at explaining things.”(31.3% agree and 10.7% strongly agree). “Sharing and discussion in the online environment works well”. (40.2% agree ;10.7% strongly agree).

10.7% students disagree the website design was quite clear. Students claimed that the online platforms should be more user friendly. Respondents less negative about “Sharing and discussion in the online environment works well” (1.8% strongly disagree ; 11.6% disagree). Respondents were most negative about the explanatory of the online teaching materials.”(3.6% strongly disagree; 14.3% disagree).

Students faced other technical glitches problems like insufficiency of computer labs, complicated online instructions and system failure that cause students’ work to be lost. All these problems caused students to feel disappointed and frustrated in Mandarin blended learning process.

Table 3
 Descriptive statistics for human factors

Item	Mean	S.D	Likert Scale Responses (%)				
			SDA	DA	N	A	SA
I feel comfortable learning online	3.39	0.93	2.7	13.4	35.7	38.4	9.8
The instructor's feedback motivated me to do more online learning	3.77	0.88	2.7	4.5	23.2	52.7	17
The online learning environment makes me feel that I am part of community	3.49	0.98	1.8	14.3	32.1	36.6	15.2

“The instructor’s feedback motivated me to do more online learning” rated the highest with mean of (3.77) followed by “The online learning environment makes me feel that I am part of the community” with mean of (3.49). According to the result, Cronbach’s alpha of human factors was 0.612.

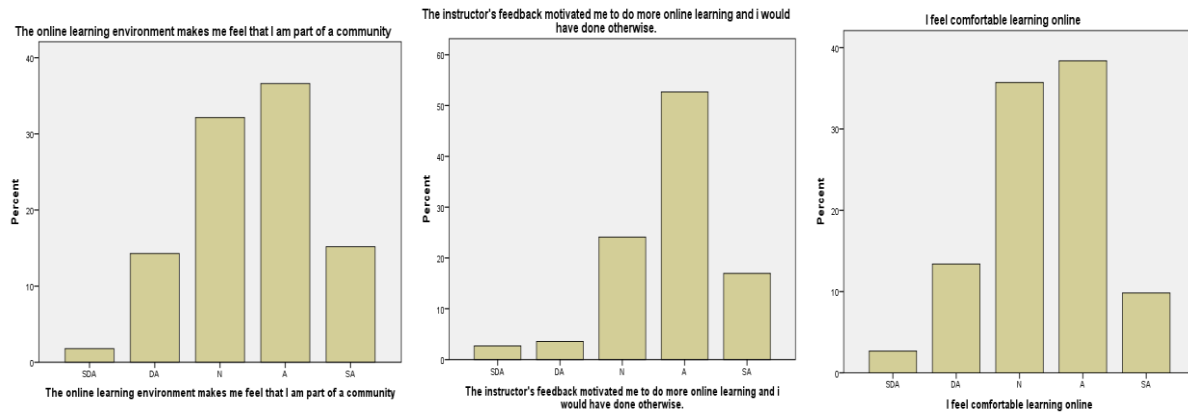


Fig. 3 Human factors

Human factors in Mandarin blended learning sessions included social isolation, some students claimed that they hard to communicate with the instructor and classmates; feel difficult to ask question in blended learning session. They asked for more clear and interesting interaction by using video conference. During blended learning session, some students experienced being isolated and stress due to lack of interaction with classmates.

Factors such as lack of immediate response from instructor, no guidance on how to do the task online and feedback from instructor, these factors demotivated students to do more online learning. Some students felt that they would easily forget to complete their online task in the blended learning sessions.

2.7% students strongly disagreed and 13.4% disagreed “I feel comfortable learning online”, Students claimed that too many tasks to be completed. They are more preferred to learn through face-to-face learning class due to all these challenges.

Data showed that the human factors are the most challenging factor for students in the Mandarin blended session, followed by technical glitches and internet connectivity.

Student Suggestions

According to Seymour (1972), “Developing many happy satisfied customers, should be the

primary goal of higher education. Thus, focusing on enhancing customer satisfaction in universities is important in developing customer value.” This study aims to enhance and increase the quality of blended learning in Mandarin Classes by surveying students’ suggestions. The chart 1 showed students’ suggestions from 74 respondents. The rest of 38 respondents answered “no suggestions”.

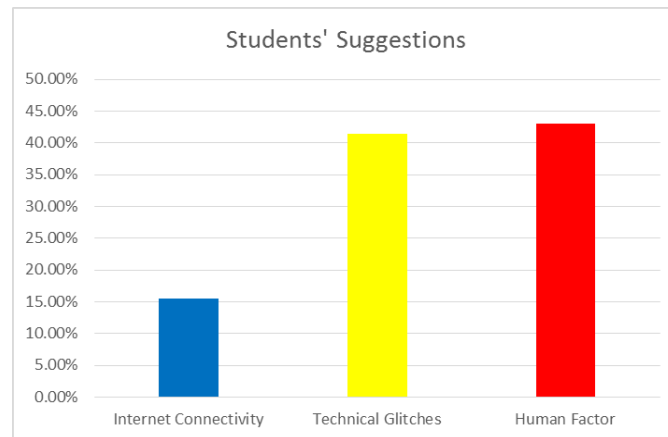


Fig. 4 Student suggestions

Overall, the data can be categorized in 3 groups which is internet connectivity, technical glitches and human factor. Majority of the students’ suggestions (43.10%) focused on human factors which included provide well trained instructors, feel isolated and stress due to lack of interaction with classmate, add on live time chat or video conference to create more interesting interaction and increase face- to- face teaching. According to Abeer (2014), these human factors might create confusion to students as they experienced being isolated and lacked belonging to any group.

Followed by 41.38% of students’ suggested that technical glitches need to be overcome in effort to enhance the effectiveness and ease of use of blended learning in Mandarin classes. The suggestions included more user friendly interface, increase the stability of system, more memory space for uploading video clips and save information and aligned the course material with course syllabus. At the start of a new course, students expect a clear course outline that includes content structure and organizational features. (Beck & Davidson, 2001) They like simple and organized blended learning course (Light 2001). A well- structures and organized course increases students’ confidence and competence (Thompson & Macdonald,2005). Clear instructions and guidelines given by instructors will help enhance the students’ blended learning experience (Thompson & Macdonald, 2005).

A total of 15.52% suggestions urged that university should provide a better internet connectivity to support the blended learning system. According to Faith (2017), Abdul Wahed et

al. (2013) and Margaret (2013) findings, technical glitches and internet connection are the biggest challenge in blended learning courses. Students suggested that university should provide high speed internet connection, more computer lab for easy access and more easy way to access the campus's internet.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed blended learning presents challenges to students. From this study, we know of students' challenges experienced during their blended learning sessions. We have to understand and know students' challenges so that we can minimize these, and help promote better learning outcomes and learning experiences.

From the study, we know that internet connectivity problems and technical glitches are the main challenges faced by students followed by human factors. All these challenges caused students feel disappointed and frustrated to do their blended lessons. Students prefer face-to-face learning due to all these challenges.

The program management and e-learning of the universities should take seriously to the respondents' suggestion to enhance effectiveness of blended learning. They have to provide better training to the instructors and students, provide the labs with more computers. In addition, institutions have to improve the system by implementing user friendly design and clear platform to motivate students and instructors to use blended learning. Universities should provide internet or Wi-Fi connection that is strong enough to ensure the accessibility.

The limitation of this study is based only one campus. Future research area is to conduct this research to all other languages and public universities such as Japanese, Korean and Arabic languages as well. Future research could also include of the challenges, suggestion and perception of blended learning from other public universities.

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