BLENDED LEARNING IN TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates teachers' perceptions of blended learning in the context of English Literature during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research aims to understand how English teachers adapted to the sudden shift from traditional to blended learning environments. The research includes exploring the strategies employed by teachers when integrating literature lessons into a blended learning approach, impacts of blended learning during the pandemic to teachers' teaching professionalism and problems faced by teachers when designing Literature lessons during the pandemic. Four English Literature teachers from SMK Datuk Peter Mojuntin, Penampang participated in semi-structured interviews, providing different perceptions into their experiences with blended learning. The findings reveal that technology played an essential role in facilitating teaching and learning during the pandemic. The combination of traditional and digital methods allowed for a balanced approach to teaching English Literature, fostering interactive and collaborative learning experiences. Despite these benefits, the transition to blended learning presented significant challenges in terms of adaptation, professional growth and connectivity issues. The study helps to understand the implications of this research especially for researchers, teachers and students. The data gained from this study offer guidance for improving blended learning practices and addressing the needs of students and teachers in a rapidly evolving educational setting.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English literature in today's era is quite different from a few years back as it comes with different problems and challenges. Technology has a tremendous impact on the curriculum, particularly in the year when the pandemic struck, and nearly all schools went borderless in their education. With the use of technology as a part of the curriculum, both teachers and students need to shoulder some responsibilities in order to become digital citizens. As technology becomes a more prominent part of the curriculum, teachers continually face the challenges to effectively and properly equip students with educational technology. In other words, teachers should model the use of technology to support the curriculum so that learners can increase the true use of technology in learning their language skills (Costley, 2014; Murphy, DePasquale, & McNamara, 2003 as cited in Ahmadi, 2018, 117). The choice of online learning during this pandemic may have felt right. But, broadly identified challenges

with e-learning are accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning and educational policy (Murgatrotd, 2020). Many countries have substantial issues with a reliable Internet connection and access to digital devices (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Thus, blended learning is highly recommended since it has become essential for students to engage in offline activities as well.
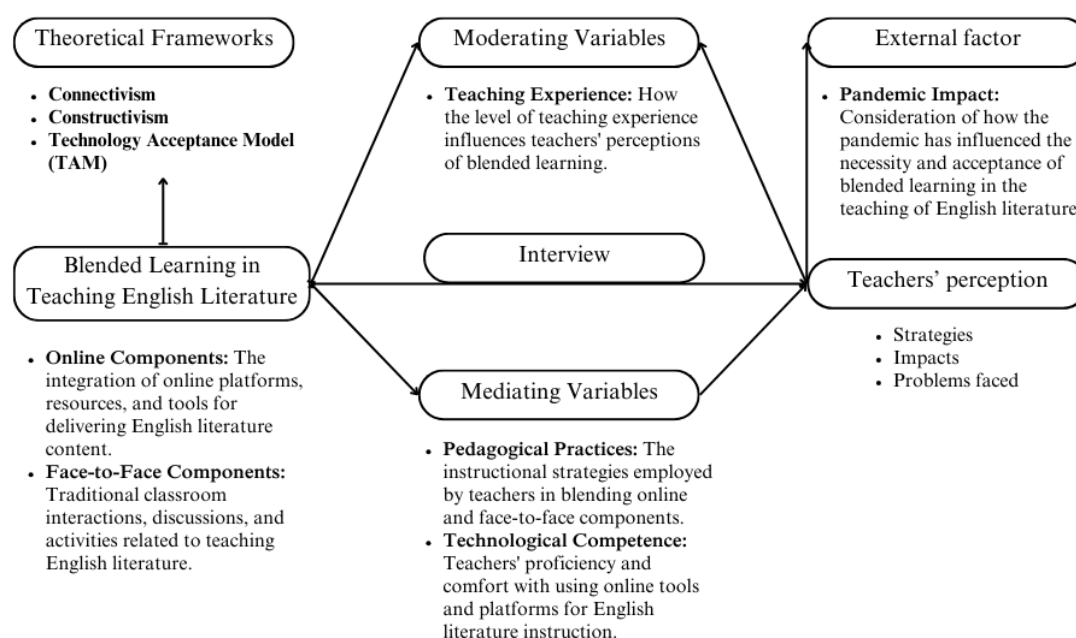

Figure 1: The Study's Conceptual Framework

The primary objective of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive blended learning within the context of English literature lessons. The research seeks to explore the strategies, impacts and problems that English literature teachers encounter when incorporating blended learning into their teaching practices. The research objectives are defined as follows:

1. To explore the strategies employed by teachers when integrating literature lessons into a blended learning approach during the pandemic.
2. To determine the impacts of blended learning during the pandemic to teachers' teaching professionalism.
3. To investigate the problems faced by teachers when designing the Literature lesson for blended learning during the pandemic.

Based on the objectives, three research questions are formulated as detailed below:
1. What strategies can be employed to integrate literature lessons into a blended learning approach during the pandemic?
2. How does blended learning during the pandemic impact the teachers' teaching professionalism?
3. What are the problems faced by teachers when designing the Literature lesson for blended learning during the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Blended Learning

Blended learning is said to be the best educational alternative during the pandemic especially to those that are accustomed to traditional learning, face-to-face in class. The reason for this is that one of the most influential blended learning models is the community of inquiry (CoI) framework. It has been argued that the generic nature of the framework, and that it resonates well with both face-to-face and online learning, make it useful for understanding and designing blended learning (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008 as cited in Hrastinski, 2019).

Blended Learning And Technology

Technology encompasses a wide range of innovations, methods, and devices that are created and utilised to improve various aspects of human life. It has become a central part of human lives as we are deficient beings who use technology to complement, enhance, or disburden ourselves.

ICT is an essential part of the teachers' profession through which they can use it to facilitate learners' learning. ICT refers to technologies that provide access to information through telecommunication which includes the internet, wireless networks, cell phones and other communication mediums (Ratheeswari, 2018, 45). With the help of ICT tools in the classroom, teachers are able to find new strategies of teaching rather than sticking to the traditional ones.

Technology Integration In Teaching And Learning

The word 'integration' is often used when technology is embedded in teaching and learning. Pierson (1999), as cited in Stojković (2019), considered technology integration as an effective transfer of teachers' technological, pedagogical and content knowledge to their students. It is believed that, the more systematic and appropriate this integration is, the more effective and successful it will be. In other words, when technology is being used effectively in blended classrooms, the teaching and learning process will be beneficial. Both teachers and learners will experience the fruitful information gained from the use of various technology tools. Teachers are responsible to use suitable technological materials and bring learning experience to the learners' world.

George Siemens' Connectivism Learning Theory

Connectivism is well suited for blended learning environments, where students have access to multiple sources of information and are encouraged to collaborate with their peers. The theory argues that learning is not just an individual process but a collective process that involves connecting and collaborating with others (Kilag et al., 2023). George Siemens first introduced connectivism in a seminal online article originally written on December 12, 2004, and then updated on April 5, 2005, where he called it "a learning theory for the digital age" (Corbett & Spinello, 2020). Thus, it is essential to explore the eight principles of George Siemens' Connectivism Learning Theory (Siemens, 2005), and how these principles can lead to limitless opportunities within English Literature blended classrooms.

Constructivism Theory

Currently, there are several emerging innovations in the world of education, particularly in approaches to the learning process. One notable innovation is constructivism. According to Muhajirah (2020), constructivism departs from the belief that knowledge is a process of formation that continues to develop and change. The essence of constructivism theory is the idea that students must find and transform complex information into other situations, and if desired, that information becomes their own. It can be seen that this theory is a combination between Cognitive and Social Constructivism theories. Piaget's theory of cognitive development describes students as active and motivated learners and hence calls for the use of student-centered strategies (Nurrenbern 2001, as cited in Agopian, 2022). Meanwhile, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights the important role of social interactions in cognitive development, thus promoting the implementation of collaborative learning approaches and group interaction models in the classroom (Ormrod, Anderman, & Anderman 2016, as cited in Agopian, 2022).

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The TAM defines that the attitude; people's feeling, positive or negative, regarding the behavioural intention performance towards adopting a system is predicted by their perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989 as cited in Sukendro et al., 2020). TAM is particularly relevant in the context of educational technology, including blended learning settings. Thus, it is essential to look at the two main concepts of TAM in the context of blended learning.

Past Studies

Some studies in accordance with blended learning during and after the pandemic, especially in English language teaching, have been undertaken by some scholars. In particular, researchers have been interested in contributing valuable insights regarding teachers and students perceptions of blended learning in English classrooms. Wahyuningsih (2022) and Afandi (2022) conducted a narrative inquiry method to explore the experiences of English language educators in incorporating English skills during the COVID-19 pandemic in blended learning. Their finding, sharpens the beliefs that teaching English could be practised not only in offline class but also in online class. Other than that, it also strengthens the beliefs that English language teachers should adjust the ways, strategies and methods in English language teaching in every situation especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research uses qualitative methodology in which the data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews along with a descriptive approach. Qualitative study is developed to have an in-depth and extensive understanding of the issues by means of their textual interpretation. In other words, qualitative research is intended to approach the world 'out there' (not in specialised research settings such as laboratories) and to understand, describe, and sometimes explain social phenomena 'from the inside' in a number of different ways (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Meanwhile, qualitative description represents the methodological category that has the least level of inference among the qualitative methods, one that allows "the reading of lines, as opposed to reading into, between, over or beyond the lines. Thus, it

should not be understood as a low-quality approach or solely as an entry-point to really deep research (Seixas, Smith & Mitton, 2018).

In this study, a type of descriptive approach used is through interviews. The interview method is primarily used to elicit data from the research objectives. Interviews usually involve a systematic and well-planned process to ensure the collection of relevant and reliable data. It is important for interviews to be conducted as the participants can recall their experiences using a blended approach during and after the pandemic. Thus, open-ended questions encourage detailed responses, providing rich and nuanced data that may be challenging to capture through other methods. This study focuses on interviewing English teachers regarding blended learning amid and post pandemic to gain a comprehensive understanding of their effective strategies, impacts and problems in implementing and adapting to Literature blended learning environments.

Purposive sampling which refers to a group of non-probability sampling techniques was also used in this study. The reason for purposive sampling is the better matching of the sample to the aims and objectives of the research, thus improving the rigour of the study and trustworthiness of the data and results (Campbell, Greenwood & Walker, 2020). This method is particularly useful when the aim is to obtain in-depth information or insights from individuals who possess particular knowledge or experiences relevant to the research, in this case, English teachers at SMK Datuk Peter Mojuntin.

In this study, the researcher prepared a set of predetermined questions beforehand. Then, there are follow-up questions to explore additional topics based on participants' responses. This flexibility allows for a more in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. Besides that, this type of interview allows participants to express themselves in their own words and share information that is personally meaningful. A deeper exploration of participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours can be facilitated especially when the study was related to their situation during the pandemic outbreak. The structured interview questions are as follows:

1. What strategies can be employed to integrate literature lessons into a blended learning approach during the pandemic?
2. How does the blended learning approach during the pandemic impact your teaching professionalism?
3. Do you have problems designing the syllabus or teaching guidelines for blended learning during the pandemic?

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This table shows the participants' responses for Question 1.

Question 1: What strategies can be employed to integrate literature lessons into a blended learning approach during the pandemic?	
Teacher A:	*When it comes to blended learning…technology plays a big part in the teaching and learning process. I always incorporate the use of digital applications like using online quizzes related to literature lessons. Whenever we had physical classes, I usually provided the quiz link for them to do as homework later.*
Teacher B:	*"I usually assigned the students to do something before their online classes. I asked them to read and understand certain short stories or poems beforehand. Then, I used platforms like Google Classroom to post*

	their thoughts or opinions regarding their readings. I also use certain platforms like Padlet to encourage discussions among them."
Teacher C:	*"To integrate literature lessons into a blended learning approach, you can start by combining traditional reading assignments with interactive online discussions. I used platforms like Zoom or Google Classroom for live discussions."*
Teacher D:	*"Well…you can incorporate traditional methods such as reading and writing with applications such as canva where students can design mind maps or create posters."*

Table 1: Interview Question 1

Theme #1 Integration of Technology in Blended Learning

The theme highlighted that technology played a central role in blended learning. Teachers utilised a variety of digital platforms and tools to enhance the learning experience. For example, one teacher mentioned the use of online quizzes:

> *"I always incorporate the use of digital applications like using online quizzes related to literature lessons."*

Another teacher emphasised the importance of using platforms like Google Classroom and Padlet to facilitate discussions and assignments:

> *"I usually assigned the students to do something before their online classes. I asked them to read and understand certain short stories or poems beforehand. Then, I used platforms like Google Classroom to post their thoughts or opinions regarding their readings. I also use certain platforms like Padlet to encourage discussions among them."*

Theme #2 Combination of Traditional and Digital Methods

One of the teachers incorporated both traditional and digital methods in which she provided the students with certain literature texts beforehand to read and instructed them to access Google Classroom to complete their online tasks.

> *"I usually assigned the students to do something before their online classes. I asked them to read and understand certain short stories or poems beforehand. Then, I used a platform like Google Classroom to post their thoughts or opinions regarding their readings."*

Another teacher stated that digital tools were indeed beneficial during the critical moments, *"Well you can incorporate traditional methods such as reading and writing with applications such as canva where students can design mind maps or create posters."*

For Research Question 2, Table 2.0 illustrates the findings.

Question 2: How does blended learning during the pandemic impact the teachers' teaching professionalism?	
Teacher A:	*"It was really difficult to adapt with the situation at first. Everything*

	happened so fast…I had to document everything online and the tasks for the students had to be online as well. Although I have been teaching for years now, the situation was really out of hand. It taught me to always be prepared in case something like this happens again."
Teacher B:	*"Teachers had to adapt very quickly to technology and online teaching methods. The pandemic situation really improved teachers' proficiency with technology and fostered professional growth as well. I learned a lot of things during this time but mostly in terms of technology."*
Teacher C:	*"Blended learning during the pandemic has pushed teachers to enhance their tech skills and adapt to new teaching methods, which has definitely improved our professionalism. However, it can be overwhelming at times, juggling these new responsibilities while ensuring the quality of education remains high."*
Teacher D:	*"It was difficult because we had to improve our ict skills, especially for teachers from the older generation. It was stressful to figure everything out but I cannot deny that it helped me to improve myself as a teacher in terms of technology skills."*

Table 2: Interview Question 2

Theme #3 Challenges and Adaptation

This theme captures the need for rapid adaptation and the importance of being prepared for unexpected changes. The sudden shift to online teaching also posed significant challenges. Two teachers described the experience as overwhelming:

> *"It was really difficult to adapt with the situation at first. Everything happened so fast. I had to document everything online and the tasks for the students had to be online as well…It taught me to always be prepared in case something like this happens again."*

> *"However, it can be overwhelming at times, juggling these new responsibilities while ensuring the quality of education remains high."*

Another teacher added that it was indeed needed for the teachers to adapt to the situation quickly, *"Teachers had to adapt very quickly to technology and online teaching methods."*

Additionally, the teachers emphasised the importance of being able to adapt quickly and efficiently to changing circumstances. One teacher remarked, *"It taught me to always be prepared in case something like this happens again."*

Theme #4 Professional Development and Growth

Despite the challenges, the pandemic period was a time of significant professional growth for teachers. Although the initial stage of teaching was considered as overwhelming, they admitted that the experience really improved their skills especially in ICT. One teacher shared, *"It was stressful to figure everything out, but I cannot deny that it helped me to improve myself as a teacher in terms of technology skills…"*

Another teacher added, *"Blended learning during the pandemic has pushed teachers to enhance their tech skills and adapt to new teaching methods, which has definitely improved our professionalism."* According to this interview's responses, teachers had to learn how to effectively use multiple digital tools and platforms, manage online classrooms, and create engaging and interactive literature content for students. This experience has not only improved their technical abilities but also fostered an innovative approach to teaching.

This table shows the participants' responses for Question 3.

Question 3: What are the problems faced by teachers when designing the Literature lesson for blended learning during the pandemic?	
Teacher A:	*"There were a lot of problems that teachers had to face during that time. One thing was about online classroom participation. The attendance of the students was really bad because some of them didn't have access to the internet. Students from less fortunate families had to share the devices with their siblings. You see…teaching Literature involves a lot of reading and practice. If the students cannot participate in the class, they might be left behind. That's why I had to create online activities that they can access anytime."*
Teacher B:	*"Since we had to shift to online methods, there were a lot of issues with internet connectivity and access to devices for both teachers and students. I remembered I had to change my wi-fi plan twice just to find the best internet connection. But, I always have ready-made activities for the students through Google Classroom like objective and subjective questions."*
Teacher C:	*"One of the main problems is ensuring that all students have equal access to the necessary technology and internet connectivity. There's also the issue of balancing the workload…creating content that's equally effective online and offline takes a lot of extra planning and effort."*
Teacher D:	*"One major issue is we need to ensure all students have access to technology and have a stable internet connection since some students live in rural areas. Due to the line, students can't even join class. so as teachers, we needed to find ways to overcome these problems that at times, was something that we could not fix."*

Table 3: Interview Question 3

Theme #5 Connectivity and Access Issues

When it comes to blended learning, internet connectivity was found as a problem for the teachers. The teachers had to face challenges related to students' access to stable internet connections. *"The attendance of the students was really bad because some of them didn't have access to the internet."*

Another teacher added that internet connectivity was one of the major issues not only for the students but for the teachers as well, *"Since we had to shift to online methods, there were a lot of issues with internet connectivity and access to devices for both teachers and students. I remembered I had to change my wi-fi plan twice just to find the best internet connection."*

DISCUSSION

All four participants agreed that technology comes hand in hand with blended learning. They highlighted the vital role that digital tools and platforms played in facilitating their teaching during the pandemic. Teachers integrated various digital tools, such as online quizzes, Google Classroom, Canva and Padlet, to facilitate learning and maintain student engagement during the pandemic. These tools not only provided alternative means of instruction but also enabled interactive and collaborative learning experiences especially during the pandemic, which are crucial for subjects like English Literature that rely heavily on discussion. According to Bond et al. (2020), the use of digital platforms and tools can significantly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes by providing diverse and interactive instructional methods.

Traditional methods, such as reading short stories or novels and engaging in face-to-face discussions, are considered as common methods. These activities allow for immediate feedback and strong interaction, which are crucial for developing critical thinking and interpretative skills. However, digital methods add an extra layer of interactivity and accessibility. For instance, teachers used platforms like Google Classroom to facilitate discussions and quizzes, enabling students to engage with the material asynchronously. This approach allowed students to reflect on their readings at their own pace and participate in discussions even outside regular class hours. This hybrid method provides a better way for the teachers during the critical times of pandemic. This approach is consistent with the findings of Hrastinski (2019), who emphasises that blended learning, combining both traditional and digital methods, can provide a more flexible and engaging learning experience.

The rapid shift to online teaching posed significant challenges for teachers, requiring quick adaptation to new technologies and teaching methods. Participants reported initial difficulties in documenting and delivering content online, as well as managing the increased workload. Teachers reported that they had difficulties adapting to the new teaching methods. particularly those who were less familiar with digital tools and online teaching methods. The transition required significant effort and time to become proficient with new technologies, which added to the already demanding responsibilities of teaching during a global pandemic. These findings align with the research of Cutri et al. (2020), who explored the challenges educators faced during the sudden transition to remote teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The study found that many teachers struggled with the learning associated with adopting new technologies and digital platforms. This challenge was more identified among teachers who had little prior experience with online teaching

Teaching during the global pandemic provided a new skill for the teacher in which it taught them to always be prepared in case something similar happens again. In other words, during this period, one of the teachers highlighted the importance of being ready for unexpected challenges and equipped educators with strategies and tools to handle similar situations in the future. This preparedness is a crucial takeaway from the pandemic experience, as it ensures that teachers are better equipped to handle any future disruptions, whether they are related to natural disasters, or other unforeseen events. This finding is supported by the work of Trust and Whalen (2020), who emphasise that the Covid-19 pandemic has prepared educators to develop resilience and flexibility. Their study suggests that teachers' experiences during the pandemic have fostered a mindset of continuous learning and adaptability, which is essential for dealing with future educational disruptions.

The finding from the third interview question led to the issues in students' access to technology and internet connectivity. Participants highlighted that students from less fortunate families struggled to participate in online classes due to a lack of devices or reliable internet access. This issue is supported by the research of Van Lancker and Parolin (2020), who discuss the digital divide exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Their study found that students from low-income families were disproportionately affected by the shift to online learning due to

limited access to digital devices and stable internet connections. Students who were unable to join online classes may have missed out on important tasks which are essential for subjects like English Literature. This situation forced teachers to find alternative ways to reach and support these students.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a process of how blended learning was implemented during a period of global crisis. Researchers can make use of this study to gain information into the practical applications of blended learning models and the effectiveness of various digital tools and platforms in facilitating education. Understanding these implementations helps researchers create more defined theoretical frameworks and practical guidelines for blended learning in future educational settings. Not only that, the study highlights how blended learning and technology can be effectively integrated into literature teaching, revealing both the benefits and challenges to this subject area.

The study aids teachers to have a clear understanding of how blended learning integrates technology with traditional teaching methods. This knowledge assists teachers be aware of the benefits of using digital tools and platforms to deliver interesting lessons, leading to more effective and engaging learning experiences for students. The study's findings have several important implications for students, particularly regarding their learning experiences in a blended learning environment. The study highlights how blended learning combines traditional methods with digital tools, offering students with interesting and more diverse learning experiences. By integrating online quizzes, interactive platforms, and multimedia resources, students benefit from varied instructional approaches that can cater to different learning styles and preferences.

Therefore, future studies should expand the implementation of blended learning in subjects other than English Literature. It is highly recommended to investigate how blended learning strategies are applied and adapted across various disciplines, such as science, mathematics, or social studies. Wider studies can provide detailed understanding of its effectiveness and identify the best practices for each discipline. Future studies should include a focus on students' perspectives and experiences with blended learning. Understanding how students perceive with blended learning environments can offer various different findings into what works well and what needs improvement from the learner's viewpoint. Investigating the effectiveness of specific digital tools used in blended learning is essential for optimising educational outcomes and ensuring that technology serves as a beneficial complement to traditional teaching methods.

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