

Blended Learning in EFL Listening Class: A Case From Indonesia

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Abstract: *Blended learning emerged as an answer to combine the benefits of online learning and face-to-face classrooms. Rigorous standards remain elusive in blended learning nevertheless, particularly in terms of integration strategies. This study investigated the real implementation of blended learning in English listening class. Using Neumeier's design parameters as a lens of perspective, this study was conducted using qualitative approach. Six students and one lecturer were invited to generate narratives about the learning situation in their class. The data were analyzed using Miles and Hubberman model, which includes: 1) data collection; 2) data collection; and 3) data display. The findings revealed that face-to-face meetings were opted as the main learning mode, while e-learning mode was employed for supplemental activities. The ratio was 75% face-to-face meetings and 25% online learning. The blended course still left some rooms for improvement. Although the lecturer had perceived strong background knowledge of blended learning design, the principles were not intensively implemented in the course. The obstacles found included the students' low self awareness, network connection troubles, and plagiarism issue. Future research is recommended on assessment principles in blended course, particularly in foreign language teaching.*

Keywords: *Blended learning, e-learning, listening, ICT based learning*

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of internet had fostered a paradigm shift in educational world. The field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has been influenced by the use of technology in the learning. Recently, a new approach called blended learning is preferred by most universities in the world. The premise of blended learning is to address the issues that exist in pure online learning by combining online learning and traditional face-to-face classroom. Impeccable as it seems, questions remain in the concept of blended learning. Internet offers a borderless library for the students to broaden their learning resources. However, at the same time, it adds a degree of complexity to curriculum design. The pitfall

of blended learning, as Graham (2009) cautioned, is that defectively designed blended learning environment may result to a combination of disadvantages of both modes.

Although ICT based learning has received the most attention in ELT world, the concept of blended learning in English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching still calls for more attention. Further studies are needed to observe the real use of blended learning in EFL teaching (Grgurovic, 2009), especially in the teaching of listening. To fill the gap in the literature, this study was particularly interested in how blended learning was used in Indonesian EFL class.

The use of term ‘blended learning’, or what other experts refer to as ‘hybrid learning’, is relatively new in educational settings. There are several definitions given by the experts. According to Littlejohn and Pegler (2007, p. 26), “Blended learning is a hybrid model of e-learning that allows coexistence of conventional face-to-face teaching methods and e-learning activities and resources in a single course.” Neumeier (2005) defined blended learning as, “a combination of face-to-face (FtF) and computer assisted learning (CAL) in a single teaching and learning environment” (2005, p. 164). Garrison (2004) said that blended learning is the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences. In this paper, blended learning is defined as an integration of of face-to-face learning and online learning mode in a single course.

According to Neumeier (2005), blended learning aims for the best combination that fit the learning subjects, contexts, and objectives. However, Garrison (2004) added that there is no exact rule of how much online learning is inherent in the course. Questions remain in blended learning, particularly in terms of integration strategies. Pursuant to most papers on the subject, formulas for ideal ratio between face-to-face meetings and online activities are yet to be formulated, as has been stated by Hirumi, Bradford, and Rutherford:

The problem is there are no universally recognized formulas, algorithms or ratios for blending the design of a course or training program. Different models and case studies have been published for facilitating BL (c.f., Bonk & Graham, 2006), but it appears that there are no replicable guidelines for determining which specific aspects of a course to put online and what to

administer face-to-face (f2f) to facilitate BL. Indeed, every organization approaches BL in their own particular way (2011, p. 490).

Eshet-Alkalai, Precel, and Alberton corroborated this statement, “Most of the papers on blended learning indicate that there is no ultimate formula for blending the online and F2F learning components” (2009, p. 2).

Blended learning facilitates foreign language learning as it combines many forms and methods of teaching (Hubackova, Semradova, & Klimova, 2011). Vlachos (2010) posited that blended learning promotes the development of students’ linguistic knowledge, communicative experiences and new literacies (Vlachos, 2010). Further, LeLoup and Ponterio (2003) said that the use of computers gives positive impacts on students’ listening skill by increasing the acquisition of the target language input presented in a variety of ways (Villalobos, 2012).

This study sought to investigate how the blended learning was implemented in the teaching of EFL listening. The implementation of blended learning in this study was examined under Neumeier’s (2005) six parameters of blended learning design: 1) Mode; 2) Model of integration; 3) Distribution of learning content; 4) Language teaching method; 5) Involvement of learning subjects; and 6) Location.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study observed the listening class conducted in English Department in a state university in Indonesia. The participants of this study were 18 students enrolled in Listening Course. However, only six students and one lecturer were invited to generate narratives about the learning situation in their listening class.

The principles of qualitative approach were adopted in this study. The techniques of collecting the data in this research were observation, interview, and document analysis. The classroom learning activities were observed to obtain general representation. Document analysis was carried out by analyzing syllabus and the screenshots of the institution's official e-learning website. The data were analyzed by using Miles and Hubbermand model, which includes: 1) data collection; 2) data reduction; 3) data display and 4) conclusion drawing.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first parameter of Neumeier's is mode. This study found that the lead mode used in the learning was the face-to-face mode. Of total 16 allotted meetings, four of which were conducted in online mode and the rest were conducted in regular face-to-face classroom. Therefore, the ratio of the blended course was 25% for online learning and 75% for face-to-face meetings. The face-to-face meetings were conducted once a week at the language laboratory, each meeting lasted for 90 minutes.

During the interview, the lecturer proposed three reasons why face-to-face meeting was selected as the lead mode of the course. The first reason was because e-learning in the institution was not established solely for the purpose of replacing the existing face-to-face meetings. The second reason was insufficient infrastructures and human resources. The lecturer argued that most lecturers in the institution, especially the senior ones, did not master the technology required for in e-learning. The third reason was because the lecturer believes that the teaching of language is best delivered when accompanied with face-to-face activities.

Without face-to-face activities, the lecturer posited that e-learning would not result to the expected learning outcomes. In regards to language learning, Kang (2010) argued that face-to-face meetings in blended learning reduce psychological distance, thus fostering trust in teacher-student relationship.

Neumeier's second parameter concerns with model of integration. This study found that the face-to-face sessions were obligatory for all students. Students' presence in the face-to-face classroom was strictly required. The online sessions were utilized mainly to broaden the students' learning resources and deliver additional assignments.

Neumeier's third parameter refers to the distribution of learning contents. The functions of the face-to-face mode were: 1) to deliver learning materials and 2) to conduct remedial classes. Meanwhile, the e-learning mode was utilized to: 1) broaden learning resources; and 2) post additional assignments. The main purpose of e-learning activities was to foster students' self study.

The students expressed that e-learning was also utilized in case the lecturer was incapable of teaching. Sometimes, the lecturer played a video in face-to-face classroom then discussed the video content through online discussion in the official portal.

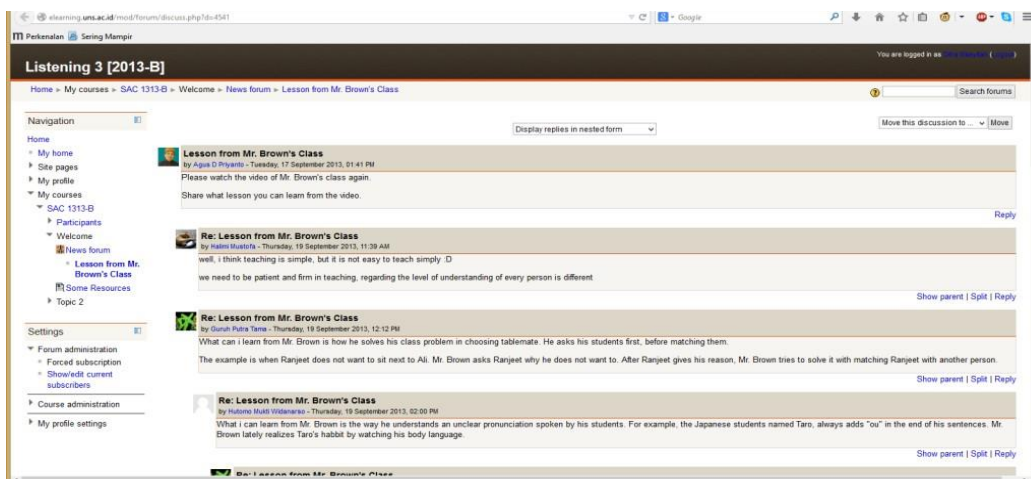


Figure 1. Online Discussion

The lecturer mentioned that e-learning benefited him in managing students' assignments. E-learning managed to oblige the students to be on time in submitting the assignments. According to the lecturer, e-learning portal automatically rejected late submission, thus forcing the students to be discipline.

However, interview with the lecturer revealed that it was rather complex for him when it came to syllabus design. There were times when it was challenging to decide whether an activity was best delivered online or in face-to-face meetings.

The syllabus was personally designed by the lecturer. The syllabus contained all the materials that students were going to learn for the whole semester. However, the syllabus did not explain how those materials were going to be delivered through the online activities.

Pedagogical matter, especially related to syllabus design, is a common concern for blended learning instructors. This issue has been discussed by many writers of blended learning. Garrison and Vaughan cautioned, "Designing a blended learning experience is a daunting challenge" (2008, p.33). At many cases, the focus of blended learning somehow turns into "how

to blend" instead of the learning itself (Chew et al., 2010).

Despite the increasing interest of utilizing e-learning in the department, this study found that not all the e-learning features were utilized. The lecturer expressed that the problem with learning activity design was the time constraint. Kearsley (2002) has alerted that instructors need to be ready for workloads in designing online courses. To address this issue, Moore (1996) recommended recruiting a team of course designers that would help design a sound syllabus. This team may include experts that master both technology and paedagogy of syllabus design.

Neumeier's fourth parameter is related to language teaching method. During the teaching process in the classroom, the lecturer used the three steps of teaching listening proposed by Field (2009), which cover pre listening, whilst listening, and post listening activities. In pre listening stage, the lecturer introduced the general idea the students would hear in the extract. The lecturer tried to stimulate the students' interest by posing some questions about the topic.

In the post-listening stage, the lecturer discussed several language features in the video. The lecturer played some parts, especially those that contained important information, several times.

However, according to the lecturer, the method of language teaching in online forum was slightly different with the one he applied in the classroom. In e-learning, it was difficult for him to use the same techniques in teaching listening.

The lecturer explained that it was complicated for him to conduct pre-listening activity in online mode. Therefore, he omitted the pre-listening stage. Instead, he put some hints to easier the students to look for the required information in the downloaded extract.

Another difference was in correcting the students' mistake. In the face-to-face mode, the lecturer immediately corrected students' grammatical mistake by suggesting a more appropriate sentence. However, in online discussion, the lecturer did not immediately correct the students' mistakes because students' fluency was his main concern. The lecturer stated that correcting grammar mistakes would discourage the students from being active in the discussion.

The fifth parameter of Neumeier's framework is the roles of the learning subjects. In this study, the roles of the lecturer were as syllabus designer, motivator, and facilitator of the learning.

Albeit the notion that the use of online resources in blended learning promotes students' self-paced study, the findings of this study indicated that the students' expectation towards the lecturer remained unchanged. Rusell (2005) suggested that in e-learning mode, the instructor's role may shift to a facilitator instead of directly leading the class. However, this study found that the students were still dependent to the lecturer. Instead

of browsing for their own learning sources, the students expected the lecturer to teach them all the materials. This finding is similar to those of Yuvienco and Huang's (2004) study that revealed that the teacher's role in e-learning remained analogous to that in face-to-face mode. In contrast, the finding of this study contradicts those of Faizal's (2012), in which he found that blended learning stimulated student engagement and self-paced study.

Student engagement appeared to be the main cause of the problem. That is why, although the lecturer continuously motivated the students almost on every meeting, there seemed to be no significant change in students' behavior.

This study indicated that students still faced some difficulties to manage their own learning, thus impeding their own progress. Most of them would only practice their listening for examination, or if the lecturer gave them listening assignments. A student stated that he realized that students were obliged to browse their own learning, but he admitted that it was difficult for him to change his learning habit.

According to Kearsley (2000), this problem can be addressed by teaching the students to be better learners, or as what Kearsley referred to as "Learning to learn." This includes teaching students about time management, goal setting, and self evaluation. Further, Kearsley put emphasis on the importance of student engagement. Kearsley stated, "To the extent that the student is engaged in active learning, there is less need for extrinsic motivation from the instructor" (2000, p. 89).

Neumeier's sixth parameter concerns with location. The face-to-face activities occurred in the department's language laboratory. This laboratory is equipped with a computer for the instructor, a set of headphone for each student, three loud

speakers, a whiteboard and an LCD projector. However, online activities did not require students to be present in the classroom. In online mode, students were given autonomy as to where they wished to access the learning materials. Students could access the materials from any places where internet access was available.

Formative and summative assessments were employed to measure the students' learning progress. The lecturer described that the formative assessment were conducted informally. He would ask his students randomly to answer his questions. If the learning objectives were not accomplished, he would bring several different audios with similar difficulty level as those of the previous meeting.

On the other hand, the summative assessments were conducted at the end of each basic competence. For summative assessment, the lecturer opted paper-based test in face-to-face mode. He proposed two reasons why he preferred paper-based test: to prevent cheating and to avoid the risk of networking problem. Face-to-face remedial classes were conducted for the students whose scores were below the standard. In remedial session, the students' difficulties were discussed and the lecturer explained to them how to answer the questions.

The major obstacle reported by the students and lecturer was connection problem. There were times when the institution's servers went down, thus hampering the learning process. At some degree, this unstable connection created problems for the lecturer's lesson plans. The connection problems somehow forced the lecturer to alter or cancel the activity plans. To anticipate it, the lecturer utilized other websites such as Pbworks.com as more reliable alternatives. Hence, despite the increasing interest of utilizing e-learning in the department, the connection trouble

averted the lecturer's interest to utilize the university's e-learning website. Therefore, this infrastructure matter is a serious issue to address. Naidu (2006, p. 3) proposed, "The fundamental obstacle to the growth of e-learning is lack of access to the necessary technology infrastructure, for without it there can be no e-learning."

Another obstacle found was academic dishonesty. The lecturer admitted that it was rather challenging for him to confirm whether the students submitted their original works. Internet, at its downside, has enabled the students to download every piece of information for free. In this study, the lecturer opted to keep reminding the students that plagiarism is a serious crime. The lecturer constantly prohibited his students from using online resources in writing essays. To discourage cheating, Watson and Sotille (2010) in Nehl (2014) suggested to alter the assessment from objective measures (multiple and true-false) to subjective ones (essays and research papers) in which in-depth understanding of a topic is required. However, detecting plagiarism was more difficult in practice. Therefore, he decided that the student assignments delivered through e-learning portals would not affect the students' final scores.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study revealed that face-to-face mode was preferred as the main mode of learning. The online mode was utilized for additional assignments. However, continuous improvement is required for better achievements of the learning objectives. Careful consideration is required for an effective blended course. Assistance from course designers and media experts may be needed to design effective lesson plans and syllabuses. Instructors of blended course should always prepare for alternative

plans in case unexpected technical problems occur.

On the other hand, students of blended learning programs should be able to manage their own learning. Meanwhile, the institution should be ready to maintain the infrastructures that are required for blended learning.

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