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Blended Learning: to Read or Not to Read

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Abstract:

Malaysian school had moved on to the second shift of Malaysia Education Blueprint, which is to make sure that all students in the school are able to master the basic skills of Bahasa Malaysia and English language. The English language is not a foreign language to people in Sabah, but many Sabah's students are still struggling to learn to read English literature because most of the reading activity takes place together or happens when they are using textbook or storybook. Meanwhile, because Sabah consist of multiracial people, English language had become their third or fourth acquired language. So, it is going to be a very tough challenge for the student to learn the English language skills, especially in reading. This conceptual paper aims to discuss the advantages of blended learning in order to increase Sabah's students reading ability in English literature. The paper will debate the benefits of blended learning for reading activities and the impact of applying blended learning in reading activities, especially during the English language lesson to the students and teacher. From the discussions, hopefully, it would provide a significant insight towards applying blended learning not just to teach English literacy reading in the classroom, but also for other language skills and other subjects.

Introduction

Students learn to read by recognizing the sounds and the letters. And then it moves on to syllable, words and then sentences. And of course, there is no exact definition of reading because "reading is surprisingly complex to define" (Urquhart & Weir, 2013). Most students in Sabah have a reading problem in the English language, especially if English is their third or fourth language acquired. The reason might be because, "individuals preferentially process information in different ways" (Shuib & Azizan, 2015). In Sabah, student and teacher often depend on the textbook or just paper as a media or source of reading. In align with the 21st century of teaching and learning, blended learning was introduced as part of the education improvisation. Only a few could really apply blended learning in the classroom because many teachers have negative perspectives towards ICT, they don't have the proper skill to handle ICT and because of the "limitations of available research" (Leask & Pachler, 2014)[1] about the effectiveness of digital technologies.

Blended learning is not common but also not a stranger to education. Because of this phenomenon, "a whole new research that examines a variety of issues related to learning effectiveness, student and faculty attitudes, access, workload, and cost benefits" (Dziuban, Picciano, Graham, & Moskal, 2016) has to be investigated in order to uncover the benefits towards English as the second language in Sabah, especially in reading. Blended learning as part of the teacher teaching and student learning process in reading activity is important, because "information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play a major role in creating a new and improved model of teaching and learning" (Yunus *et al.* 2013). According to Stahl (2015)[1], using technology in the classroom can increase student engagement and motivation, but teachers must use it effectively as a tool and not simply as a means to engage students. That is the reason why in the Malaysia Education Blueprint stated to emphasize blended learning in teaching and learning activities. Although some teacher prefers physical aids to assist their teaching activities, but "digital technologies or ICTs integrated across the curriculum can be considerably different to those that student teachers and current teachers experienced themselves at school" (Leask & Pachler, 2014).

With so many new inventions nowadays, "there are so many wonderful resources that can be found online, and technologies such as iPad's and computers can certainly be used to engage students in learning activities" (Stahl, 2015)[2]. This means by applying blended learning to teach reading, students can experience a much broader reading aspects because "reading skill involved recognition, comprehension, fluency and motivation (Bhatti, 2016)[1]. According to Khalid *et al.* (2017), skills that lead to efficient reading are very important especially in school because children reading ability is essential for curriculum access. So, with "the use of the combined source (visual and audio) doubles the teaching effectiveness and active participation of students in the learning process triples the result" (Malushko, 2015). And this could only be achieved by integrating ICT in the reading activities which also known as blended learning.

Along with that, hopefully, this study would increase the teacher's awareness towards the potentiality of blended learning to overcome students' weakness in reading English literature. Especially in the context of the advantages of integrating ICT in their lesson for the reading activity. At the same time, would understand the significant of blended learning in order to help students to increase their reading skills because Yunus *et al.* (2013) found out that several teachers noted that students who did not exhibit much attentional control at the start of the year were able to attend at the technology centre and felt that the students then became more able to focus in class. Thus, the aim of this paper is to provide exposure and the importance of emphasizing blended learning in order to improve the student reading ability in ESL.

Influence of Sabah's Students Reading Ability

According to Ellis (2016), reading are not natural skills. This means that reading is a progressing skill that needs to be gain and assimilate until it becomes something that we could actually do naturally. Sabah's students have a hard time to master English literacy reading skills because they usually sound the letters with another language (either native phonics sound or Bahasa Malaysia) phonics sound and they got used to it. Furthermore, English letters sound is so abstract that it even sometimes can change or "can be pronounced differently in different words" (Ellis A. W., 2016). With other language sounds influencing them in everyday life, it is hard for them to remember the exact sound of each word or some letters because the English language is not their daily or everyday used language. Because of no intuitive knowledge of English to fall back on, of course the student rely on the teacher or any easy guidelines to help them to read correctly, effectively and appropriately.

Children's word-reading accuracy and fluency (i.e., decoding) is linked to aspects of the family environment that children grow up in, including parents' educational attainment, how often parents read themselves and to their children, and availability of reading material (Bergen, et al., 2017; Davis-Kean, 2005; Johnson, Martin, Brooks-Gunn, & Petrill, 2008; Kiuru et al., 2013; Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). In Sabah, especially the native parents. They tend to get busy with their work because having food on the table for the family is much more important for them. Thus, leaving the children unsupervised by adult hoping that the elder siblings or the elderly at home, would take care and probably guide them to do their homework and do their readings. Even reading to their child is not a practice that is common to parents in Sabah. They also tend to ignore their children ability in reading English material because they thought reading wouldn't do anything to help them to speak the language. Furthermore, they don't even bother to prepare any English language reading material because they thought it would be just a waste of money to buy for their kids. Besides, many English related reading materials are just too expensive for them.

While some could not read, others have the ability to read but yet they don't have the ability to understand. Jamieson (2013), had given reading a definition that state "reading that links decoding and comprehension skills with reflection and real understanding". According to multicomponent views of reading comprehension, readers aged 7 to 12 years draw on language knowledge and cognitive processes at the word-, sentence-, and discourse-level when constructing this representation (Silva & Cain, 2015; Oakhill & Cain, 2012; Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005; Vellutino, Tunmer, Jaccard, & Chen, 2007). This could relate to students who can read (decode) but they cannot understand. For example, a student could read a sentence perfectly, but he or she could not understand what he or she had read. Another example is, he or she could read perfectly, can understand the sentence word by word, but cannot understand the sentences as a whole. Meaning, there is a loophole from the reading process of the child. Thus, cause them to not be able to read correctly.

Last but not least, socioeconomic status (SES) has long been recognized as an important predictor of children's school performance (Zhang, et al., 2012). In Sabah except for families whose parents were working in the bigger city or high-income families, tend to do not care about their children English language achievement. Even if they know their children did not score well or achieve well in English literacy reading, they usually won't take it for granted. Thus, cause their children to get a lower score in reading test or probably can't even read. Historically, low-income students as a group have performed less well than high-income students on most measures of academic success (Reardon, 2013). In this case, the parents should re-evaluate their perspectives towards learning the English language especially in reading English literature in order to adopt the 21st Century education needs.

Discussion

School textbooks in Malaysia are state-sponsored. The government has spent billions of Ringgits over the years to provide free textbooks for students (Hussin, Nimehchisalem, & Kalajahi, 2016). At the same time, government especially the KPM had tried to prepare an effective textbook that had a content that brings meaning to student learning. But yet, "students mispronounce and misunderstand the meanings of the words while reading their textbooks in English" (Bhatti, 2016)[2]. This is why blended learning is important in order to engage the students to maximise the use of textbook together with the use of ICT, in order to achieve the maximum potential of learning, especially to read in the classroom. Together with the use of ICT, "visual aids like pictures, videos and projectors encourage students to read texts with interest" (Yunus, Salehi, & John, 2013). The reason behind this is, the interaction between students, textbook, and teacher itself is just a routine activity to the students, students need attraction in order for them to learn. When the learning medium is appealing, students become curious and desirous of getting immersed in the process of learning (Oyelere, Suhonen, & Sutinen, 2016). That's why blended learning could affect students reading skills in a positive way.

Reading is a progress that supposed to help students to absorb pools of words that helps to increase their vocabulary. When students able to recognize a lot of words, they will not have the problem to read the words or sentences because they don't have to guess or sound them out unconvincingly. Reading with just the help of the image of the letters or probably some pictures won't able to help the students to remember the words. According to Mascolo *et al.*(2014), visual memory is not the primary mechanism for sight-word storage, that does not mean it is unrelated to reading acquisition. This means through blended learning, students will be able to learn not just with the help of visual but also with audio. Thus, make the learning process much easier and concrete that able them to absorb necessary input and built up the

knowledge of reading.

The ultimate causes of individual differences in learning to read are the biological and environmental factors that shape the development of brain systems underlying reading (Hulme & Snowling, 2015). In Sabah, not all student in one classroom together is the same as one another. Some might have a reading problem and some might not know anything at all. Yet, their reading ability can still be triggered by the use of the correct technique. One of it is by using ICT. Language learning has grown beyond the boundaries of the four walls of the classroom; in fact, most language learning occurs outside and informally (Yunus & Salehi, 2012). Through blended learning in the class, the teacher could teach the students in the class using ICT which could fulfil the children needs to acquire the reading skills. By using ICT also enables teacher to show students online, the safe way to search for knowledgeable and safe websites for them to try and self-learn back home. This could help students to practice to use the computer back home and actually improve their computer skills too. When the students are exposed longer to the ICT environment, it will indirectly help in fostering students' higher order thinking skills (Yunus & Suliman, 2014)[1].

Teaching strategies, classroom atmosphere as well as social environment can help to lessen negative attitudes (Yunus & Suliman, 2014)[2]. If the teaching process were all conducted by all the teacher itself, the student probably would be afraid to read especially during reading aloud. According to Warner, et al (2015), they do not understand teachers' attitudes towards issues such as error correction, rehearsal time, and selecting the student. Reading from textbook usually will cause students to keep on checking their teacher expression probably to get approval that what they had read is right, or simply because they don't feel confident about being right when they read. But through blended learning, if the teacher were to use projectors or big screen television in the class, and ask students to read from that, it would be right to say that students could focus more in their reading because their emotion was distracted by it. This automatically could prevent negative attitudes as well as negative emotion form in students when they read or read aloud English literature. At the same time, by using ICT to correct students reading also helps students to feel less shy because other students won't bother to ridicule or belittle someone who mispronounce during reading.

It is undeniable that using ICT in teaching and learning activities actually also trigger a motivation for students to read what is shown on the screen rather than what is in their book or textbook. Somehow how ICT has this attractiveness that could actually pull the student's attention higher when it is about reading rather than from paper or books. According to Ciampa (2014), many learners are motivated and excited to use mobile devices; as yet, however, there is little understanding of what it is that makes learning with mobile devices so engaging and motivating to use. So this phenomenon can best be described as students are more engaging to read using ICT because of their intrinsic motivation. There is also a high probability that the students having such positive attraction to read using ICT because no emotion attached to it and because they also never had any bad experience about being judged by the gadget itself. This matter happens because, through student teacher, they had experience either it is good or bad that cause them to be more precautious and with emphaty. But with the use of ICT, they might feel free and does not feel any emotion based experience with it, causing them to mentally have a positive reaction towards the use of ICT to improve their reading skills.

Conclusion

The discussion on blended learning clearly shows a lot more positive impact towards students reading skills and teacher teaching technique, especially in the effort to increase students reading skills.

The result from the discussion also significantly show that KPM should or can replace the textbook with e-textbook which can be accessed from the internet or as soft copies rather than hard copies, in parallel with the concept of 21st Century of teaching and learning and integration of 21st Century Skills. By implementing that, it would actually benefit many parties. Firstly, the government could actually save billions of Ringgits over the years of providing textbook. The reason is that through soft copies or by using e-textbook, the teacher could easily copy it to all to the students. Even if the students did not bring their e-textbook, it would not be a big problem, because the teacher could show it by using the projector and etc. Besides that, if the KPM should implement new curriculum pedagogy that involves the changes of textbooks content or probably add in new syllabus, it would make things easier and updating it would be so much faster because it won't take so much time or time-consuming as printing textbooks one by one. Students also benefit from it as they don't have to carry as many books as they usually do which at the

same time could prevent back pain happens to the students in future. In addition, our country Malaysia could also help save the earth by the reducing usage of paper.

Because of the use of ICT shows lots more advantages in order to improve students reading skills, there's a high chance that it would also help the students improve in other areas of linguistics or probably in other non-linguistics subjects. Because of that, the educator could now begin to focus more of creating innovation that involves ICT in the teaching and learning activities, because there's still just so little innovation using ICT as part of teaching and learning. This is because if ICT could bring big changes towards student improvement in the learning environment. Then there's no reason why we should not use ICT more often or use ICT as the solution to tackle the students learning problems.

The most important part of ICT is the equipment and of course the internet streaming itself. The government now can focus more on improvising all their strategies in education plan toward modern globalization. The preparation of ICT equipment had long been started, many teachers and the school had been provided at least the basic needs of equipment needed in the teacher teaching activities and for the student learning activities. But mostly, the problem that arises from these are the quality of the equipment given did not reach the proper and the suitable level that we should have gotten to. This cause the teaching and learning activity in the classroom, even with all the basic equipment, still the lesson cannot be done at the maximum level. In addition, with the slow internet line or broadband network causing many internet streaming or video were impaired during lessons. This doesn't just cause students to lose interest but also cause teaching to use it less because it consumed too much time to wait for it to play smoothly.

As the conclusions, blended learning doesn't just show benefits to the students and teacher themselves. With a strategic plan from both government and Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia (KPM), is not just our education that can achieve a higher level of incredible implementation and administration. But could also actually affect our country Malaysia in lots of ways positively. This will not just change the context of teaching and learning in Sabah and Malaysia education system and style. But could also change the Sabah's socioeconomic status which could help to decrease the number of poverty in Sabah. Thus, finally can produce future Sabah's generations who are able to compete equally with other developed countries and at the same time could provide many more positive impacts to Malaysia.

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