

INVESTIGATING INDONESIAN EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON BLENDED LEARNING STRATEGY AMID POST-COVID-19 ERA

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Abstract

One of the good news of the new normal era is all humankind's sectors are opened gradually by following the restricted health protocols. Without an exception, the educational sector is also allowed by the government to open schools in the green zone. As a result, a blended learning strategy is inevitably essential to support this post-covid-19 era. Blended learning strategy is a novel pedagogical approach where the online and offline systems are combined to promote more purposeful, organized, and meaningful learning dynamics for learners. This current small-scale qualitative study aimed to investigate the specific benefits of a blended learning strategy based on Indonesian EFL teachers' perceptions. Thus, 5 open-ended written narrative inquiry questions were sent to two randomly invited Indonesian EFL teachers working in different elementary school institutions. The obtained research results unveiled that the effective utilization of blended learning strategy had successfully promoted more meaningful language learning enterprises, elevated EFL learners' learning motivation, and increased their proactive learning behaviors. However, it should also be pondered carefully that the more contextualized language learning approaches, as well as stable internet connection, are urgently needed to strengthen the effectiveness of this learning approach. Due to the obtained research results, it is reasonable to expect that Indonesian EFL experts, teachers, practitioners, and policy-makers can establish more collaborative networking to better design more qualified and meaningful blended learning activities in the future.

Keywords: blended learning strategy, EFL teachers' perceptions, post-covid-19 era

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic, all humankind's indispensable sectors such as business, tourism, and education have undergone rapid and significant shifts. Particularly in education, when all onsite teaching-learning processes have been replaced by online learning. As a consequence, educators and learners cannot efficiently reap the intended learning outcomes due to the continual adherence to a stable internet connection as well as supported technological devices. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) acknowledge that online learning is only a tentative solution to protect all educational parties from the hazardous Covid-19 pandemic since the mutual interactions between teacher and learners will never be replaced by this distant learning mode. Dealing with EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching-learning enterprises conducted in Indonesia, the utilization of this new learning habit has also caused some serious issues. The first impediment derived from the insufficient school infrastructure in sustaining the conduciveness of online learning. This obstacle is in agreement with the finding of Rasmitadila et al. (2020) that most Indonesian educational institutions, particularly, those which were resided in rural areas encountered acute problems in providing qualified internet connections and other supportive infrastructure for their learners. Asarta and Schmidt (2020) similarly mention that a considerable number of teachers and learners do not possess adequate gadgets or other kinds of electronic devices to promote more meaningful second language learning processes in their classroom vicinities.

Fortunately, those above-mentioned situations are not persisting in a long term-manner since the government has gradually unearthed the finest solutions to produce better teaching-learning dynamics for both teachers and learners. Amid the current year, the government has already allowed some schools to settle in green zones to run blended learning activities in which half of the learners can study directly at schools by following the restricted health protocols and doing social distancing while the remaining of the students study from home. It is strongly believed that the implementation of this novel teaching approach can potentially create more transformative, enjoyable, and effective teaching-learning activities. This positive educational outcome will be reaped since both teachers and learners will endure more meaning-making classroom interactions as well as intensive knowledge exposure in the light of sophisticated technological supports. This conception is well-reflected by the theory of blended learning proposed by Kintu et al. (2017) asserting that with the integration of blended learning, EFL teachers and learners will undergo more holistic teaching-learning experiences under the supervision of varied technological applications. Dziuban et al., (2018) also believe that through the incorporation of a blended learning strategy, teachers, as well as learners, will fully experience more pleasurable learning dynamics in which the technological supervisions can simultaneously make them more knowledgeable. Another advantageous benefit that can be probably reaped by EFL learners while being exposed to a blended learning approach is they will be more capable of gaining a more profound awareness of the renewable learning surroundings encouraging them to be more prudent as well as proactive academicians. This contention is closely interlinked with the blended learning theory adduced by Ma'rufa and Mustofa (2021) arguing that in the light of blended learning activities, EFL learners will potentially transfigure into more active and sensible knowledge seekers due to the dynamic nature of this learning method. In a similar vein, Arifani et al., (2019) discovered that most teachers and learners were more prone to be involved in blended learning activities instead of fully online or offline learning since they believed that more efficient teaching-learning dynamics would enable them to thoroughly receive the learning outcomes.

Another logical reason why blended learning is worthwhile to be put forth in our EFL learning contexts is that learners' autonomous, motivation, and life-long learning characteristics are significantly fostered due to the worldwide learning skills that should be mastered as well as applied by them in proper learning vicinities. In other words, it can also be stated that EFL learners have a higher degree of tendency to transfigure into more strategic academicians capable of flexibly adapting and adopting various effective learning strategies under the guidance of technological assistance. Chang-Tik (2018) theorizes that when implemented appropriately, blended learning will breed more judicious, resourceful, and self-reliant academicians who can actualize the acquired competencies relevant to accomplish various everyday life issues. Furthermore, a blended learning approach can favorably broaden learners' existing understanding of the subject-specific matters due to the expansive exposure of information forming in their technological devices and improve their learning performances to the utmost levels. These aforementioned advantages are resonated well with the theory of blended learning asserted by Boelens et al., (2017) stating that EFL learners will become more knowledgeable, and progressively elevate their existent learning performances into more advanced development in the presence of blended learning activities due to the flexible nature requiring them to constantly become more broad-minded academicians. Under the guidance of a blended learning strategy, EFL learners can also transform into more resilient and persistent knowledge seekers since they are willing to proactively participate in this new learning model without any kinds of coercion or restricted regulations forming in either online or offline learning. This argument is tightly interwoven with blended learning theory invented by Islam et al., (2018) declaring that blended learning strategy has successfully promoted a higher level of authentic and enjoyable language learning experiences where all learners are strongly committed to exploring a wide array of useful information in the knowledge enrichment processes. Conversely, the effectiveness and meaningfulness of blended learning strategy are not without the taxing challenges. The in-depth utilization of this modern teaching approach requires a higher level of internet cost, relevant educational policies, and intensive professional development training. In other words, educational stakeholders have to ascertain that the applicability of this learning approach is already well-served for teachers and learners in all classroom environments to bring about more favorable teaching-learning experiences where they can thrive better. Tamim (2018) believes that when all educational parties have been well-equipped in terms of the concept, nature, and internalization of the blended learning approach, more fruitful educational values will be entirely experienced by school institutions. Concerning all these frameworks, language teachers are strongly advocated to rejuvenate their ongoing knowledge of technological advancement, teaching pedagogy, and classroom management continuously to enable them to become a good example for their learners to always become life-long knowledge seekers. This suggestive advice is in harmony with the essential blended learning theory put forward by Moskal et al., (2013) stating that language teachers are required to become more up-to-date toward the relevant technological, pedagogical, and classroom management development before conducting blended learning processes in their particular teaching-learning circumstances to progressively strengthen learners' learning achievements, performances, and positive behaviors.

Five previous studies explored the importance of blended learning strategy integration in Indonesian EFL learning contexts. The first study, held by Arifani et al., (2019), revealed that a great number of university EFL learners supported the further incorporation of blended learning activities since their independent and persistent learning characters have been increased significantly. In another identical investigation, Ciptaningrum (2019) highly recommended Indone-

sian EFL teachers to apply blended learning activities in their specific fields to promote more laudable collaborative networking, life-long learning characters, and creativity among learners. Farani (2019) unveiled that a considerable number of university EFL learners are extremely satisfied with the integration of the blended learning approach in their two core subjects; reading and writing due to the constructive learning enterprises prompting them to keep on going to fully obtain the targeted learning objectives. Furthermore, Nasution et al., (2021) mentioned 4 effective strategies that need to be implemented by EFL teachers to actualize more effective blended learning activities namely becoming more flexible target language facilitators, arousing learners' learning interest to the fullest levels, sustainably creating positive learning atmosphere for learners, and prompting learners to become more proactive learning participants. In the last study, Sari and Wahyudin (2019) found out that the majority of Indonesian university EFL learners had terrifically fostered their target language competencies, achievements, and motivation after being exposed to blended learning environments due to the enjoyable, interactive, collaborative, and independent teaching-learning experiences where all learners can expand other learning companions' understanding through mutual sharing. The above-stated research results clearly emphasized that it is of critical importance to release a blended learning approach in Indonesian EFL teaching-learning contexts to promote more relaxing, positive, and engaging second language acquisition for diverse learners. Meanwhile, these previous studies have not yet touched upon Indonesian EFL teachers' perceptions concerning the profound utilities of this student-centered learning strategy, especially in this post-covid-19 era. Thus, the researcher was motivated to conduct this small-scale qualitative study to exhaustively investigate other potential advantageous as well as applicable values promoted by the blended learning approach in varied EFL teaching-learning enterprises. The research felt certain that the potential results of this present study will release diverse fields of beneficial knowledge for ELT experts, practitioners, and policy-makers in this nation to better maximize the further integration of blended learning approach in the upcoming teaching-learning events resulted in the progressive enhancement of EFL learners' learning achievements, satisfaction, and endeavor. Corresponding with this aim, this study was guided with this particular research problem, what are the Indonesian EFL teachers' perceptions regarding the integration of blended learning strategy amid post-covid-19 era.

METHODS

Research design

This recent qualitative study was run under the guidance of narrative inquiry to obtain more reliable and trustworthy data from the real-life occurrences shared by research participants. Clandinin and Caine (2013) confess that the major benefit of conducting narrative inquiry is to enable researchers to gain more robust data from the stories disseminated by research participants. To fulfill this research objectivity, 5 (five) open-ended written narrative inquiry questions were administered to 2 (two) Indonesian EFL teachers experiencing blended learning processes during this post-Covid-19 era. This set of narrative inquiries heed more profound attention of exploring Indonesian EFL teachers' perceptions on blended learning strategy amid the post-Covid-19 era to shed more enlightenment for Indonesian EFL experts, educators, practitioners, and policy-makers regarding the applicability of more effective strategies in utilizing this modern teaching-learning approach in the future events. For the data analysis processes, the research planned to use open coding to specifically cluster the indispensable findings into some specific themes. After categorizing these relevant data into particular categorizations, the researcher aimed to explicate each data argumentatively in the accompaniment of related

previous research findings and theoretical frameworks to yield more robust data depictions comprehensible by ELT parties.

Participants

The researcher involved 2 Indonesian EFL teachers working in different school institutions as the research participants in this current small-scale qualitative study. The first teacher is currently working at Nido Montessori Elementary School, Yogyakarta City. She has been involved in this new learning mode since last September. Previously, this teacher has also experienced a vast range of second language teaching experiences in distinctive private and public school institutions. The second participant is a senior EFL teacher working at Cita Hati Elementary School, Samarinda City for 3 years. Her teaching experience is also rich since she has dealt with many kinds of learners possessing a wide array of ethnicities, tribes, and socio-cultural backgrounds. She engaged with blended learning since in the beginning of October while the governor had already allowed this International School to start combining the online and offline learning approaches by following the required health protocols.

Ethical considerations

To maintain the confidentiality and privacy of each research participant, the researcher planned to use initial names like teacher 1 and teacher 2 while giving some argumentations, explanations, and depictions in the next section. By considering this matter, more authentic data collections would potentially be obtained since the research participants felt secure and become more versatile while revealing some truth concerning the effectiveness of this modern student-centered learning method.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part aimed to profoundly explain 2 major themes derived from the research participants namely (1) blended learning strategy promoted more positive second language learning atmosphere and (2) blended learning strategy improved EFL learners' language learning atmosphere.

Theme 1: Blended learning strategy promoted more positive second language learning atmosphere

According to the first teacher's premise and experiences, the utilization of a blended learning strategy is of utmost importance since the majority of EFL learners have progressively improved their learning engagement. This positive second language learning outcome obtained since the allotment of teaching-learning instructions are more effective due to the half number of learners attending online and offline classroom learning processes eventually affecting them to show more proactive learning participations. This finding is closely correlated with the previous result of Aji et al., (2020) finding out that most EFL learners have displayed more positive perceptions of the target language learning enterprises after being exposed to the blended learning approach due to the clearer pedagogical instructions addressed by their teachers. Furthermore, the first teacher simultaneously confessed that the implementation of a blended learning strategy has also promoted a higher level of second language learning satisfaction toward learners. This satisfaction comprised of the significant elevation of their target language learning skills, achievements, and positive behaviors. All these aforementioned rewarding merits took place since learners are flexibly allowed to explore a vast array of information as well as knowledge closely connected with their specific topics. Aldosemani et al., (2019) highly

recommended all ELT practitioners and educators internalize blended learning strategy in their diverse classroom learning surroundings to open a broader trajectory for learners to discover a wide array of useful knowledge independently. In another investigation, BakarNordin and Alias (2013) unveiled that a great number of university EFL learners felt content with the continual incorporation of the blended learning approach in their classrooms since they gained a more in-depth understanding of the targeted learning materials. The following interview excerpts are taken from the first teacher who also argued similarly.

[The First Teacher: *The students can be more focus to the lesson delivered. They can engage more and understand the materials better.*]

[The First Teacher: *Yes. Because the teachers can pay full attention to the students and observe the students in the classroom. Thus, teachers have more chances to get engaged directly with the students.*]

To a lesser extent, the positive impacts of blended learning strategy do not merely halt in the cognitive aspects of learners but also the effective sides. This contention is well evidenced by the first teacher acknowledging that blended learning had also transformed learners into more autonomous, collaborative, proactive, and emphatic academicians. These learners have demonstrated a more solid collaborative networking while they are assigned to resolve various learning problems critically. Unquestionably, all these practicing competencies will be more impactful while these learners plunge into the real working world in the future since laudable affective skills can predominantly determine individuals' life quality as well as success. Ja'ashan (2015) uncovered that a substantial number of university EFL learners having fully attained more advanced development of collaborative, critical thinking, and independent learning skills in blended learning activities were more capable of carrying out varied taxing life obstacles compared to other learning members participating in traditional learning environments. Similarly, Shivam and Singh (2015) strongly suggested worldwide EFL educators start applying a blended learning approach in their various classroom contexts to constantly provoke a higher level of learners' language learning collaborative networking might influence their independent learning characters as well as critical thinking skills development. All these above-mentioned delineations are resonated well with the prior finding of Nurmasitah et al., (2019) who unfolded that a considerable number of university EFL learners have gradually engendered intensive language learning initiatives, established a higher degree of collaborative networking with other learning community members, and experienced more enjoyable language learning dynamics after being immersed into blended learning activities. The first teacher's interview excerpt is also positively linked with these explanations.

[The First Teacher: *They can improve their social skills such as share with others; help their friends and such things. Also, by meeting and engaging with their friends, they can develop their social skill and practicing to me more independent learners.*]

However, the maximum utilization of a blended learning strategy is not without its serious drawbacks. The first teacher also repudiated that in the light of the blended learning approach, she had to maintain more balanced attention toward learners studying from home and school. This classroom management issue should be pondered more conscientiously by our educational experts, practitioners, and policy-makers unless blended learning enterprises will potentially

hinder learners to develop their target language learning endeavor and skills to the utmost levels. These aforesaid hindrances are in conjunction with the previous finding of Ismayana et al., (2020) sensibly mentioning that the efficient implementation of blended learning approach cannot be done overnight since in-depth teaching-learning instructions have to be well-prepared by EFL teachers, intensive blended learning training should be well-armed to the teachers, and appropriate learning platforms sustaining this new learning approach should be compatible with current learners' learning needs. Wang et al., (2015) stated that it is of paramount importance for all educational institutions to prepare EFL teachers' mental, cognitive, and affective readiness before internalizing blended learning strategy to create a more robust mutual interplay between the 21st-century life and technological skills that will be armed to the learners. Furthermore, it is also worth highlighting here that the meaningful blended learning approach can also potentially be distracted with limited internet connectivity taking place in some particular school institutions in our nation. The first teacher even sanctioned that in the frequent presence of internet connection problems, the ongoing learning processes have become wasteful. As a result, the targeted learning outcomes, as well as achievements, will not be fully obtained by learners. More than that, EFL learners can also become more demotivated while continuously being hampered with these unpleasant hurdles turning them into spoon-fed academicians passively waiting for their teachers to equip them with limited knowledge or skills exposure. All these conceptions are harmonious with the prior finding of Mohsen and Shafeeq (2014) pointing out that the scarcity of stable internet connection had successfully made EFL teachers and learners feel spiritless to entrust their existing second language learning processes to blended learning strategy poorly resulted in diminished learning outcomes. Kofar (2016) believed that without the intensive and compatible blended learning professional training, EFL teachers will be seen as mediocre language learning instructors in the presence of their learners due to the time management, materials design, and internet connection deficiency. In another identical finding, Zaim and Mudra (2019) unfolded that most university EFL learners preferred to have full onsite second language learning dynamics rather than premature blended learning processes where poor internet connection, irrelevant learning activities, and solitary learning dynamics occurred recursively. These conceptions are also proved by the following first teacher's interview excerpts.

[The First Teacher: *Perhaps, the limited devices and how to pay attention both to the students in the classroom and online.*]

[The First Teacher: *So far, I try to provide sufficient devices to support the learning process and try to listen carefully to the students' needs both online and offline.*]

Theme 2: Blended learning strategy improved EFL learners' language learning motivation

The second EFL teacher forthrightly repudiated that the accurate implementation of the blended learning strategy had progressively improved learners' second language learning motivation. This positive target language learning benefit emerged due to the backwash of long-term online learning periods that is experienced by all learners. The second teacher sanctioned that the majority of her young learners experienced unpleasant learning events during the online learning processes where unstable internet connections frequently existed and a lack of mutual interactions that generally take place in face-to-face learning enterprises. As a result, this hybrid learning strategy can be deemed as one of the appropriate responses to overcome those

aforementioned learning obstacles in terms of maintaining EFL learners' learning focus, engaging them to be more proactive learning community members, and becoming more responsible academicians. In obedience with these tangible teaching-learning experiences, Graham et al., (2013) discovered that a great number of university EFL learners were more liable to show more proactive learning behaviors, motivated to ask questions, and responsible for handling various learning tasks after being immersed in blended learning activities. In another identical finding, Porter et al., (2014) unfolded that most EFL academicians were more willing to strengthen their target language skills continuously, be more encouraged to explore a wide variety of target language learning materials, and cooperatively participate in the ongoing teaching-learning dynamics. These above-explained conceptions were also confirmed by the interview excerpts shared by the second EFL teacher as follows.

[The Second Teacher: *The significance of blended learning in my EFL classroom is that it becomes the essential learning activities to let students enjoy the learning process as how it used to be.*]

[The Second Teacher: *Most students have shown signs of being bored during the online learning process. By having blended learning, it helps to boost students' motivation to learn, especially students who are having problems to focus on lessons.*]

Another indispensable value that has also been obtained after the immersion of blended learning strategy is the more mutual rapport between learning community members is well-established. Put in other words, in the presence of blended learning dynamics, learners can better socialize with their classmates, undergo more meaningful sharing with teachers, and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the specific imparted lessons. The second EFL teacher also underscored that the direct interactions, as well as intimate relationships between teacher-student and student-student, will never be replaced by online learning enterprises in which both teachers' and learners' meaningful interactions are strictly confined to the screen. Chandler et al., (2013) scientifically theorized that the blended learning approach can act as a good means to erect more holistic teaching-learning processes wherein all learners could experience a more real-time language learning atmosphere by interacting enjoyably with other learning partners and teachers. Similarly, Sakina et al., (2020) highly suggested globalized EFL teachers introducing a blended learning approach toward learners since it would not merely bring them closer to the more fruitful target language attainment but also the more significant elevation of their social skills. Luaran et al., (2015) strongly remarked that the critical importance of blended learning effectiveness is strongly embedded within its satisfying target language learning achievements, more favorable teaching-learning environments, and understandable learning materials deliverance. All these above-mentioned explanations are closely correlated with the following second teacher's excerpts.

[The Second Teacher: *Meeting their friends and teachers face to face is surely different compared to looking them only on the screen.*]

[The Second Teacher: *It's a great help for the students as the effect of the presence of the teachers and friends is real compared to having only online learning every day.*]

In the end, the further internalization of the blended learning strategy is not without its short-ages. As mentioned by the first teacher in the previous section, unstable internet connection,

EFL teachers' anxiety, and minimum experiences in applying this novel teaching approach will become serious for every educator aiming to activate this learning mode in their multivariate classroom vicinities. Similar hurdles are also approved by the second teacher. She honestly confessed that the unstable internet connection issue did not only happen in the classroom contexts where the ongoing language learning processes proceeding but also at learners' homes. The second teacher felt apprehensive that if this problem will recur constantly again the future teaching-learning events, blended learning activities can potentially induce negative, unpleasant, and frustrating language learning enterprises for teachers as well as learners. All these argumentations are compatible with the prior research result of Setyaningsih (2020) stating that a vast variety of pedagogical approaches and high-quality internet connections are crucially needed by EFL teachers in an attempt to apply more effective blended learning activities to actualize more contextualized language learning enterprises harmonious with learners' learning objectivities and needs. Smith and Hill (2019) frankly acknowledged that there were remain some critical inquiries required to be responded to by ELT experts, educators, practitioners, and policy-makers in incorporating blended learning strategy in terms of learners' readiness, the availability of stable internet connectivity, and precise teaching-learning venture where all learners feel collectively embraced. Concerning all these points, Zainuddin and Attaran (2016) overtly repudiated that the lack of robust technological supports and insistent professional training would act as hazardous barriers for EFL teachers attempting to implement a blended learning approach in their manifold classroom contexts since learners were potentially not encouraged to explore various learning materials independently when the designated open-knowledge sharing is either inaccessible or irrelevant to their learning objectivities. All these readiness are also harmonious with the following excerpts addressed by the second teacher.

[The Second Teacher: *Although it helps to motivate the students, as for now, I haven't seen the significant signs of blended learning as elevating students' skills, confidence and academic achievements.*]

[The Second Teacher: *Some of the obstructions are related to the technical things like each participant's internet connection which can hinder the learning and teaching process when it's down, including the teacher's. Others include things like the students' readiness and motivation to be active during the learning process.*]

CONCLUSION

Based on the obtained results, it can be inferred that the further utilization of a blended learning strategy will potentially bring about a considerable number of influential impacts toward EFL learners' second language learning motivation, competencies, and achievements. The major cause of these positive target language learning merits is the robust establishment of mutual reports among learning community members; teachers and learners. When all learning community members have fully constructed a higher degree of learning commitment in their classroom surroundings, all the pre-determined learning objectivities, as well as processes, can be embodied holistically since the direct, flexible, autonomous, and socialized nature are the essential recipes to run more contextualized blended learning enterprises. Aside from these advantageous values, there remain two specific shortcomings discovered in this small-scale qualitative study. Firstly, since this short-term investigation only relied on one particular research instrument; open-ended written narrative inquiry questions, the future researchers are encouraged to make use of a wide variety of reliable research instruments such as teacher journaling, Likert-scale questionnaire, and classroom observation sheet to produce more robust data. Secondly, further

replication of this current study can be conducted in higher school institution levels like Junior and Senior High School to contribute an additional understanding to Indonesian EFL experts, educators, practitioners, and policy-makers regarding the more sensible as well as contextualized strategies while implementing blended learning strategy in multivariate educational levels.

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