Full paper

Understanding the Blended Learning Experiences of English Language Teachers in a Distance TESL Degree Programme in Malaysia

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Abstract

In an effort to improve the status and the professional qualification of non-graduate primary school teachers, the Ministry of Education, Malaysia recently mandated a large scale change effort to upgrade non-graduate teachers to become graduate teachers via a a specially designed distant education degree programme, called the Graduate Programme for Teachers (Program Pensiswazahan Guru also known as PPG in Malay language) using a blended format involving part face-to-face (F2F) and distance learning. This paper examines the learning experiences of the first cohort of TESL teachers undergoing the blended learning (BL) courses. Specifically, learning experiences were examined in the form of (1) the in-service teachers' perception towards the BL approach, and (2) the learning experiences supporting or impeding their learning using the BL approach. To gain an appreciation of the in-service teachers' experience with the BL system, both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used, namely a survey consisting of open and closed questions, focus groups interviews and reflective journals. Findings revealed the teachers generally have positive perceptions of the blended course design. However, when viewed through the theoretical lens of Activity Theory (AT), data revealed tensions both between and within the components of the activity system in the BL environment. The paper concludes that further fine-tuning needs to be taken to ameliorate the challenges faced, particularly the contradictions and tensions involving issues related to willingness and attitudes towards learning the courses (object/outcome component); Schoology and learning materials (Mediating tools); collaboration (Rules) and opinions related to 'teacher's presence' (Division of Labour).

Keywords: Blended learning; distance learning degree; learning experiences; schoology learning management system; activity theory

Abstrak

Dalam usaha meningkatkan status dan pencapaian akademik guru-guru bukan siswazah sekolah rendah, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia baru-baru ini telah melancarkan usaha perubahan besar-besaran untuk menaik taraf guru-guru bukan siswazah untuk menjadi guru-guru siswazah menerusi program pendidikan jarak jauh khas yang dipanggil Program Pensiswazahan Guru (PPG). Program ini menggunakan format "teradun" yang melibatkan kedua-dua pembelajaran bersemuka (face-to-face, F2F) dan juga pembelajaran jarak jauh. Kertas ini mengkaji pengalaman pembelajaran yang dialami para kohort pertama guru TESL yang menjalani kursus-kursus berasaskan pembelajaran "teradun" (BL). Pengalaman pembelajaran dikaji dari segi (1) persepsi guru-guru dalam perkhidmatan terhadap pendekatan BL, dan (2) pengalaman pembelajaran yang menyokong atau menghalang mereka daripada menggunakan pendekatan BL. Untuk menghayati pengalaman guru-guru dalam perkhidmatan mengenai sistem BL, teknik kualitatif dan kuantitatif telah digunakan, iaitu soal selidik yang mengandungi soalan-soalan terbuka dan tertutup, temu bual berfokus, dan jurnal reflektif. Dapatan menunjukkan guru-guru mempunyai persepsi positif terhadap kursus teradun tersebut. Namun begitu, melalui "kanta mata" Teori Aktiviti (AT), data menunjukkan ketegangan kedua-dua komponen dalaman dan luaran bagi sistem aktiviti persekitaran BL tersebut. Kertas ini menyimpulkan bahawa terdapatnya keperluan untuk penyelarasan teliti bagi memperbaiki cabaran-cabaran yang dihadapi, terutamanya percanggahan dan ketegangan yang melibatkan isu-isu berkaitan dengan kesediaan dan sikap terhadap pembelajaran kursus (komponen Objek/Hasil); Schoology dan bahan pembelajaran (Alat pengantaraan); kolaborasi (Peraturan) dan pandangan yang berkaitan dengan "kewujudan pengajar" (Pembahagian kerja).

Kata kunci: Pembelajaran teradun; ijazah pembelajaran jarak jauh; pengalaman pembelajaran; sistem pengurusan pembelajaran *schoology*; teori aktiviti

■1.0 INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as the bedrock of all nation-building efforts, in particular, in producing high quality human capital towards achieving a nation's vision. In order to produce excellent human resources to keep pace with the increasingly competitive global economy, comprehensive and practical strategies are needed. Like all countries in the world, Malaysia takes pride in her relentless efforts at improving the quality of her education system. At the heart of all education changes viz-a-viz quality improvement is to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and one of the ways that was identified was to raise the academic qualification of serving teachers.

In cognizance of the need to improve the quality of education in Malaysia, a specially designed distant education degree programme, called the Graduate Programme for Teachers (*Program Pensiswazahan Guru* (PPG) in Malay language) was initiated by the Teacher Education Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia with the intention to scale-up the academic qualification of non-graduate teachers and to enhance the quality of teaching, learning, and management in Malaysian schools (Teacher Education Division, MOE, 2012). The PPG programme is a collaborative endeavour between the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Ministry of Education Malaysia, with a number of local Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), namely Teacher Education Institutes (TEIs), and Education faculties of public and private universities throughout the country. Initiated in 2009 and approved in 2010, the PPG programme is offered to non-graduate teachers below the age of 47 years to upgrade and enhance themselves. The PPG programme is funded by the Malaysian government based on budget allocated under the Tenth Malaysian Plan (2011 to 2015). This massive programme is estimated to involve about 100000 in-service teachers, 8686 secondary school teachers and 91171 primary school teachers. It is targeted that by the end of 2015, 90 percent of all secondary school teachers and 60 percent of primary school teachers will be graduate teachers (Teacher Education Division, MOE, 2012).

Due to the amount of investment involved and the scale of in-service teachers involvement, an in-depth study on such an initiative is timely. This paper reports on an attempt to understand the learning experiences of the first cohort of TESL teachers, who were pursuing the degree of English Language for Primary Schools (TESL major), one of the major options offered by Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) in East Malaysia. Besides the English Language major, UMS also offers majors such as Teaching of Mathematics and Science and Teaching of History and Geography. Specifically it examines the learning experiences of the first cohort of TESL teachers via the blended approach to learning. Learning experiences were examined in the form of (1) the in-service teachers' perception towards the BL approach, and (2) the learning experiences supporting or impeding their learning using the BL approach.

It is hoped that the findings obtained will help throw more light into what works and what does not work in a blended learning environment in order to better understand the affordances and challenges faced in the introduction of the blended learning environment. Findings obtained from this study not only provide useful feedback regarding the teachers/students' learning experiences and course delivery, but also feed-forward to improving students' future learning and future course planning, implementation and evaluation.
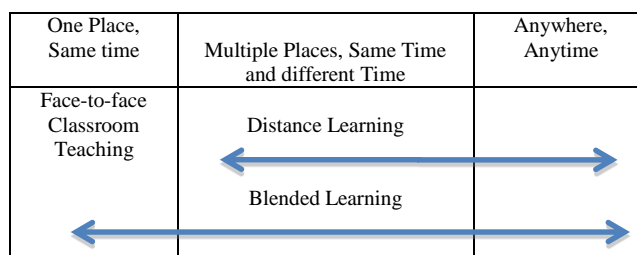
1.1 What Is Blended Learning?

Blended learning (BL) is not a new phenomenon, particularly in the context of higher education. According to the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, blended learning courses are becoming increasingly significant to complement, not replace, traditional forms of teaching (Mitchell & Forer, 2010). According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), BL is a combination of traditional face-to-face (FTF) classes with web-based material. It describes a learning environment that either combines teaching methods, delivery methods, media formats or a mixture of all these. It also refers to the integrated learning activities such as a mixture of online and face-to-face learning (Moebs & Weibelzahl, 2006). To Leakey and Ranchoux, (2006: 264) 'blended learning by definition is almost eclectic'. Singh (2003) elaborated BL as a set of learning strategies or dimensions that mixes various event-based activities, including traditional instructor-led training, synchronous online conferencing or training and asynchronous self-paced study. Sharpe *et al.* (2006) pointed out that the term BL is quite difficult to define; it can mean different things to different people, institutions, or organisations. Generally, the various meanings of BL can be summarised to two definitions as follows:

1) the integration of traditional learning with web-based on-line approaches; and
2) the combination of a number of pedagogical approaches, irrespective of the learning technology used.

Based on the two common definitions, BL can be described as a hybrid learning model where more than one delivery mode is used to optimise the learning outcomes. BL often brings together traditional learning and e-learning modes. Figure 1 constructs the spectrum of delivery mode in terms of time and space, and illustrates the relationship between traditional learning, e-learning and blended learning. As shown in Figure 1, the one-place-same-time traditional face-to-face classroom teaching fits at one end of the spectrum of the learning delivery mode, then pure e-learning fits on the other end. The traditional learning style offers the learner face-to-face contact and support, whereas e-learning can be delivered anywhere, anytime (asynchronously), for example at the learner's home or workplace. BL overlaps with both ends of the spectrum and occupies a wide range in the middle.

One Place, Same time	Multiple Places, Same Time and different Time	Anywhere, Anytime
Face-to-face Classroom Teaching	Distance Learning ⟷ Blended Learning ⟷	

Source: Modified from Maguire and Zhang (2006)

Figure 1 Spectrum of delivery mode

There are numerous claims being made about the advantages of BL. Singh (2010) argues that BL resource provides greater opportunities to comprehend and extend the knowledge presented. In a study using BL with in-service teachers, Abraham (2007) posits BL provides in-service teachers with more control over learning and helps foster critical thinking. However, little research has been done into BL in undergraduate studies, particularly with in-service teachers. Thus far, published studies have tended to focus on the different methods of teaching and on the innovation introduced (Sharpe & Benfield, 2005), but not much serious attention has been given to students' experiences with this type of learning (Lim & Morris, 2009). The use of ICT in higher education, particularly with in-service teachers requires an evaluation of the

contribution of these tools to teachers' learning, especially when they are used as a complement to the more conventional F2F methods (Ginns & Ellis, 2009). Therefore, the main purpose of the study is to examine the in-service teachers' experiences of the BL process. Specifically, the learning experiences were examined in the form of (1) the in-service teachers' perception towards the BL approach, and (2) the learning experiences supporting or impeding their learning using the BL approach.

1.2 Research Questions

To this end, two main research questions were formulated, namely:

(1) What are the in-service teachers' perceptions towards the BL approach?
(2) What learning experiences supported or impeded the teachers' learning via the BL approach?

■2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Using Activity Theory to Understand In-Service Teachers' Learning Experiences of Blended Learning Courses

Activity Theory (hereafter AT) has been used quite widely as a theoretical framework for the study of tensions and contradictions in an activity system. First developed by Leont'ev (1981), and realised as Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (Cole, 1996), it provides a tool for theoretical understanding of conflict, friction, contradictions and inconsistencies both between and within components of an activity system (Engeström, 1987, 1999; Blin & Munro, 2008). When it comes e-learning, we are aware of studies which have focused on the tensions arising from e-learning implementations but without explicit reference to AT (e.g. Duffy & Kirkley, 2004). There has also been some speculation about the use of AT as a theoretical framework for e-learning (Oliver *et al.*, 2007; Dyke *et al.*, 2007; Wold, 2011) as well as attempts to embed it in e-learning tools (Joyes, 2006) but AT has not yet been systematically applied to the study of blended learning, with the exception of Wold (2011) who proposes the SEEP instructional design model for blended learning writing courses for English language learners (ELLs), and Gedera and Williams (2013) who examined contradictions in an online university course facilitated by moodle in New Zealand. Both studies by Wold (2011), and Gedera and Williams (2013) took place in the Western contexts, which socio-culturally is different from that of Malaysia.

In order to understand the in-service teachers' experiences of the BL courses, we adopted Engeström's (1987, 1999) cultural-historical activity theory that introduces six important dimensions, along with the dynamics among them: Subject, Object (the goal of the activity system), Norms, Division of Labour, Community and Instruments. Applying this framework to a university classroom in its day to day operations, we could assign the in-service teachers to the dimension 'Subject', the learning goals for the in-service teachers to the dimension 'Object', the implicit and explicit rules that structure social interaction to the dimension 'Norms', the prescribed roles of the lecturers and the in-service teachers to the dimension 'Division of Labour', the group of in-service teachers and their lecturers to the dimension 'Community' and different educational tools to the dimension 'Instruments'. AT is used as an investigative tool to analyse the blended learning environment in the form of tensions, frustrations, misunderstandings and miscommunication experienced by the teachers in undertaking the distance degree.

These contradictions may create conflicts, interruptions and misunderstandings. However, if they are resolved they can also be sources of change or development. Kuutti (1996) was attributed for coining the term, and he defines contradiction as a misfit within elements, between them, between different activities, or between different developmental phases of a single activity. Engeström (1987) proposed four levels of contradictions (1) primary, (2) secondary, (3) tertiary and (4) quaternary. Primary contradictions can occur within the elements of activity systems (e.g., within the community), while secondary contradictions may arise between the elements of an activity system (e.g. between the community and subject). Tertiary contradictions, on the other hand, arise when activity participants face situations where they have to use an advanced method to achieve an objective (e.g., when they are introduced a new technology). Finally quaternary contradictions occur between the central activity system and outside activity systems. In the context of our research, the contradictions that emerged within and between (primary and secondary) the elements of the activity system are illustrated in Figure 2. In other words, AT provides the researchers with a tool to analyse the opportunities afforded and the challenges faced in the introduction of the blended learning environment.
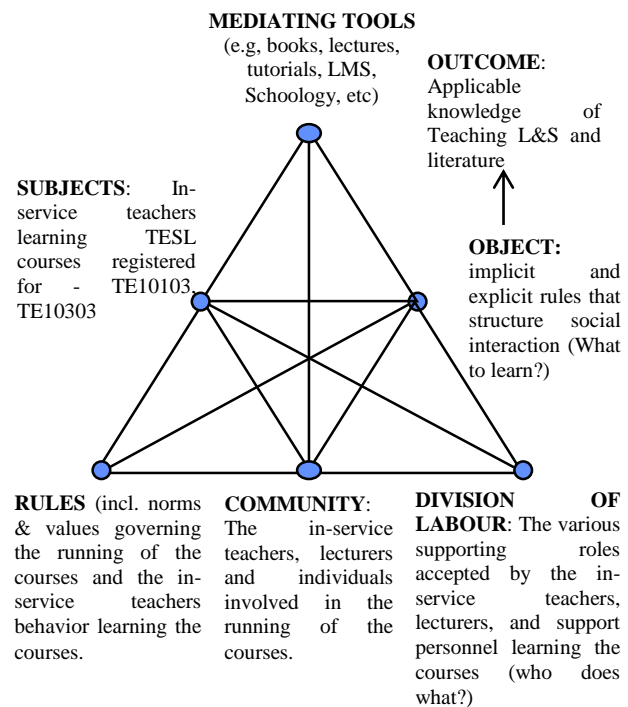
MEDIATING TOOLS (e.g, books, lectures, tutorials, LMS, Schoology, etc)

OUTCOME: Applicable knowledge of Teaching L&S and literature

SUBJECTS: In-service teachers learning TESL courses registered for - TE10103, TE10303

OBJECT: implicit and explicit rules that structure social interaction (What to learn?)

RULES (incl. norms & values governing the running of the courses and the in-service teachers behavior learning the courses.

COMMUNITY: The in-service teachers, lecturers and individuals involved in the running of the courses.

DIVISION OF LABOUR: The various supporting roles accepted by the in-service teachers, lecturers, and support personnel learning the courses (who does what?)

Figure 2 The main components of an activity system

■3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

A total of 122 in-service English teachers participated in the study. These teachers were the first cohort non-graduate in-service teachers currently studying for a specially tailored 4-year degree course in TESL in the School of Education and Social Development, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Sabah, Malaysia. These teachers teach English Language at the primary level in Borneo, Sabah. Their age ranges from late-20s to mid-40s. All of them have been English teachers for at least one year, with an average of 12 years' experience. For the majority of the in-service teachers, this was their first experience in using an e-learning platform, although most had previously informally used the web to gather information,

or prepare coursework in schools or second-level education, prior to entering university.

3.2 Course Design and Modules

This paper focuses on the two TESL courses over two semesters in 2012, namely TW10103 Teaching of Listening and Speaking Skills and TW10203 Introduction to Literature, that the teachers undertook Each course was delivered by using a blended learning approach which involves 120 hours of student learning time (SLT), and was typically organised based on (a) 30 hours of self-preparation which involves reading of course module and completing exercises on it; (b) 20 hours of face-to-face intensive lectures and tutorials; (c) 22 hours of e-learning which takes the form of online tasks such as discussion forum, interactive quizzes hosted on an LMS with social networking capabilities called Schoology; (d) 33 hours spend on completing an assignment to produce digital storytelling to be used in the teaching of Listening and Speaking or Teaching of Literature; (e) 15 hours on examination revision and exam taking. Table 1 summarises the allocation of study hours for each course.

Table 1 Allocation of study hours

Activity	No of hours
Reading the module and completing the exercises (10 topics, each of 3 hour duration)	30
Attending 3 F2F lecture and tutorial sessions (each of 6 hours and 40 minutes duration)	20
E-learning comprising participating in online discussion, online discussion forum, and online quizzes.	22
Completing a DST assignment to teach Listening & Speaking and or Teaching of Literature	33
Revision (12 hours) and Examination (3 hours)	15
Total	**120 hours**

3.3 Schoology Learning Management System

The main e-learning platform used was the free web-based Learning Management System, known as Schoology. Schoology was preferred to the university's moodle-based Learning Management System (SmartUMS) due to two principal reasons. Firstly, Schoology is easier to access from remote areas where most of the teachers are based, compared to campus-based LMS (SmartUMS) due to the stringent firewall restrictions imposed by the university's LMS server. Secondly, the participants preferred Schoology because it offers social networking features (see Figure 3), much akin to the popular Facebook tool used by most of the teachers. Principally, Schoology consists two main contexts 1) interactive communication and 2) academic information exchange (Manning *et al.*, 2011). The facility for interactive communication permits teachers to create discussion questions, collaborative groups for assignments that allow some kind of dynamic interaction among the in-service teachers and their teachers. As for the second aspect of academic information exchange, Schoology provides the in-service teachers the opportunity to access their grades, attendance records, and teacher feedback on electronically-submitted assignments. In short, via Schoology, a range of different e-learning tasks and assessments were included to complement the traditional intensive face-to-face meetings.

3.4 Instruments

To probe the teachers' learning experiences, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected via questionnaire, reflective journals, and focus group interviews. The survey, focus groups interviews, and reflective journals gathered the most relevant data of in-service teachers' experiences of the blended learning process, as well as the challenges faced in learning how to learn in a blended environment.

Figure 3 Sample of schoology interface

3.4.1 Quantitative Data – Questionnaire

A post-Likert scale questionnaire was designed and used to gather teachers' opinions and views of the BL system (see Appendix A). At the end of Semester 1 and 2, all the 122 in-service teachers were given a questionnaire to elicit their feedback of the blended learning environment. Both online and off-line versions of the questionnaires were given to all the respondents. The online version was attached in Schoology and the hard-copy was distributed at the end of the class. The questionnaire consists of questions related to their overall impressions of the BL environment, Schoology, learning materials, and demographic data of the respondents. A Likert-type scale from 1 to 5 (*Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Unsure (U), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA)*) was used (the scale is in reverse for negative items). In total, 40 questionnaires were returned and analysed. The data obtained from the questionnaires was analysed based on the mean score of the items.

3.4.2 Qualitative Data – Reflective Journal and Focus Group Interviews

For qualitative data, two data sources were elicited – reflective journals and focus group interviews. The reflective journals helped chart the teachers' reflections in learning the two courses, while focus-group interviews were conducted as follow-up to the reflective journals in order to probe deeper into the reflections made. As discussed in the earlier section, the main heuristic for the qualitative data was Activity Theory. Thus, in writing their reflections, participants were specifically asked to focus on the following dimensions, abstracted from theoretical lens of Activity theory, namely (a) Subject, i.e., in-service teachers learning the

TESL courses; (b) Rules (When and where to learn?), i.e., the implicit and explicit rules that structure social interaction; (c) Object/Outcome (What to learn?), i.e., learning of the course content, particularly the Learning outcomes (d) Division of Labour (Who does what to learn?), i.e., the prescribed roles of the lecturers and the in-service teachers; (e) Community, i.e., the in-service teachers, lecturers, and other stakeholders in the BL system; and (f) Mediation tools (How to learn?), i.e., the learning tools (e.g. the blended learning environment – Schoology, and the face-to-face meetings for lectures).

In total, 60 reflective journals were returned and analysed. In the case of focus-group interviews, two voluntary groups of teachers participated, one group consisting ten teachers and the other eleven teachers. The focus groups interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Both the reflective journals and interview transcripts were then analysed by comparing data with data to find similarities and differences of common ideas and beliefs and coded into themes.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively using SPSS Version 18 to examine teachers' perceptions of the BL environment. Qualitative data were thematically analysed and coded iteratively using Nvivo based on criteria of saliency and saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was addressed based on the techniques of prolonged engagement, triangulation, and referential adequacy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure referential adequacy, attempts were made to capture and document the data in their original form. Verbatim quotes were used in some instances to give a flavor of the teachers' experiences in the blended learning environment.

■4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings are presented based on the order of the research questions posited:

4.1 What are the In-Service Teachers' Perceptions Towards The BL Approach?

Based on the 29-item questionnaire that focuses on eliciting perceptions about their overall impressions of the BL environment, Schoology learning management system, and learning materials, the findings revealed that a vast majority of the teachers had positive perceptions of the blended course design and Schoology as a platform for learning.

The efficacy of the BL approach all received resounding endorsements from the students (see Table 2). For example, Items 1, 7 and 10 which have a mean score of about 4, indicates that the students have positive attitudes towards the BL approach that they have gone through.

In terms of the perception of the benefits of BL to their learning, they also indicated that they have gained some improvement in their learning (Table 3). More than half of the students indicated that they have improved in their skill in writing, reading, listening, and speaking (Item 3, mean score 4.1; Item 17 mean score 4.2). These responses seemed to agree with the responses indicated in Item 6, 9, 12, 13, 14, and 15 (mean score more than 4), that BL approach has facilitated them in their learning through the interaction with the teacher and classmates, and the resources that were provided. Furthermore, students also responded that the BL approach has positive "impact" in their motivation in learning, by being encouraged to learn as shown in Item 5, 18, and 20.

Table 2 Frequency and mean score of questionnaire items concerning students' attitude towards BL

Items		SD (1)	D (2)	U (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Mean
	Attitude towards BL						
1	I am in favour of the use of BL to this course	1	0	4	23	12	4.1
7	I enjoyed talking to others about BL.	1	3	8	18	10	3.8
11	*BL was a waste of time.*	19	18	1	1	0	4.4
10	Applying BL for this course was more delightful and relaxing than traditional methods.	1	2	3	24	9	4.0
8	*I don't like to take part in this BL process if given a choice.*	11	22	4	1	1	4.1

Frequency of response spans columns SD–SA.

Table 3 Frequency and mean score of questionnaire items concerning students' perception of bl in learning

Items		SD (1)	D (2)	U (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Mean
	BL approach in learning						
2	Applying BL in teaching this course made me like this course better.	1	0	5	23	11	4.1
3	Applying BL in teaching this course helped me improve all my skills (writing, reading, listening, and speaking).	0	1	3	27	8	4.1
4	I find this course easier when applying BL in teaching.	1	1	6	22	10	4.0
5	The technique of BL encouraged me to learn.	0	1	4	21	13	4.2
6	Applying BL for this course enhanced the chance for interaction with the teacher.	2	1	5	20	12	4.0
9	BL helped me learn better.	1	3	0	23	12	4.1
12	By applying BL for this course, the chance of interaction with my classmates was enhanced.	1	2	5	20	12	4.0
13	With BL, I get access to both printed and online materials which helped me learn better.	1	0	1	23	15	4.3
14	Watching YouTube videos and getting engaged in discussion forums.	2	0	7	21	9	3.9
15	Doing online quiz.	0	3	2	23	11	4.1
17	The discussion forums increased my writing abilities.	0	2	3	19	15	4.2
18	The discussion forums were interesting.	0	1	3	23	12	4.2
19	*The discussion forums didn't encourage me to interact with my classmates.*	11	23	1	4	0	4.1
20	The BL content encouraged me to learn.	0	1	2	27	9	4.1

Frequency of response spans columns SD–SA.

Likewise, items focusing on the learning platform used (Schoology) were also positively endorsed. As shown in Table 4, the application of the Schoology platform in BL indicated that it consisted of "ease of use" features (Item 24, 26 and 27), and

indicated to have improved the technological skills (Item 23, and 28).

Table 4 Frequency and mean score of questionnaire items concerning students' perception of schoology in BL

Items		Frequency of response					Mean
		SD (1)	D (2)	U (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	
	Application of Schoology in BL						
1 6	Getting to know and use Schoology.	0	0	0	26	13	4.3
2 1	The online activities on Schoology were related to the course objectives (ILOs)	0	0	2	22	15	4.3
2 2	*I hated using Schoology.*	22	17	0	0	0	4.6
2 3	Using Schoology improved my computer skills.	1	0	2	23	13	4.2
2 4	The instructions provided in Schoology were easy to follow.	0	0	1	24	13	4.3
2 5	*I got scared when I operated BL techniques on Schoology.*	10	12	10	7	0	3.6
2 6	Schoology was easy to use.	0	0	2	24	13	4.3
2 7	*Schoology was complicated.*	14	22	1	2	1	4.2
2 8	Schoology helped me to use internet effectively.	0	1	5	22	11	4.1
2 9	*I felt my knowledge using Schoology was limited compared to my peers.*	6	13	13	7	1	3.4

Analysis on data from the open-ended items seems to corroborate with the findings of the closed-ended items. The in-service teachers pointed to the flexibility that the online component offers as a major advantage. The "any time/anywhere approach" allows them to work whenever it suits them best and when they can perform most productively. Another aspect of the blended learning model that was viewed favourably by in-service teachers was the co-operative learning component. In-service teachers did their assignments and projects in groups. When experiencing problems in-service teachers seek assistance within the group while only approaching the lecturer as a last resort.

4.2 What Learning Experiences Supported Or Impeded Teachers' Learning Using The Bl Approach?

The focus group interviews and reflections were thematically analyzed in an attempt to understand the blended learning experiences, viewed in terms of affordances and challenges faced. Analysis yielded ten categories, grouped under three dominant themes which are affordances, benefits, and challenges as shown in Table 5 and Figure 4.

4.2.1 Benefits

The first theme generated is the factor of benefits. Benefits are defined as the advantages and positives derived from the learning outcomes of the TESL courses and the BL environment. Grouped under theme of benefits are the categories of (1) IT skills; (2) Pedagogical skills; (3) Learning Skills; and (4) Positive attitudes.

This theme recorded the highest number of counts, totalling 96 instances. It appears the course activities and the BL learning approach have improved the teachers IT skills and pedagogical skills significantly.

Table 5 Qualitative data: coded themes and categories

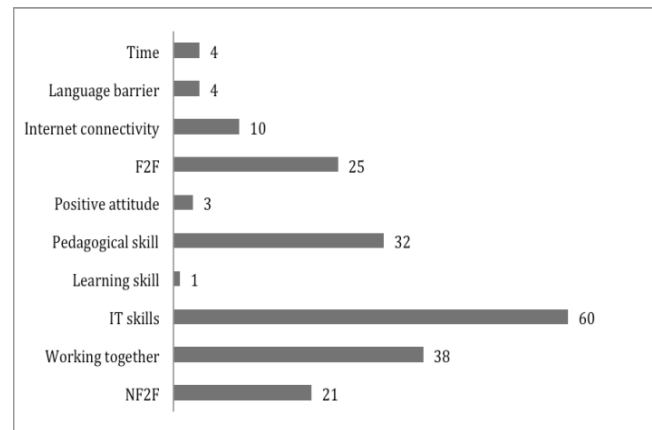|	Themes	Frequency	Categories	Frequency
1	Benefits	96	IT skills	60
			Pedagogical Skills	32
			Positive Attitudes	3
			Learning skill	1
2	Affordances	59	NF2F	21
			Working together	38
3	Challenges	43	F2F	25
			Internet connectivity	10
			Time	4
			Language barrier	4
	Total	198		198

Figure 4 Qualitative findings based on Thematic analysis

Besides that a few teachers also claimed they have benefited in terms of learning skill and having a positive attitude towards learning. The majority of the teachers appear to acknowledge that the BL and the assignment given to produce digital storytelling materials for teaching Listening and speaking and/or teaching of Literature have improved their technological skills, which in turn also enhanced their pedagogical skills in their teaching and learning in the classrooms.

> *Three things that I benefited most from this course (sic). First the DST assignment is fantastic and it will really help me in my teaching in class. Second, I love the module. This is because the module not only helped me in preparing for my examination but also to critically reexamine how I teach phonics skills with my students. Third, I got many useful resources for my class through this course (S31).*

> *The learning content was really helpful and useful for me. I learned to integrate technology in my teaching materials such as creating our own DST and used it as one of my teaching resources in my classroom which it attracted my pupils' attention and they enjoyed it (S37).*

4.2.2 Affordances

The second theme concerned the factor associated with affordances. An *affordance* is a quality of an object, or an environment, which allows an individual to perform an action (Wikipedia, free encyclopedia). In this study affordances are attributed to the unplanned outcomes that emerged from the BL environment. Grouped under the theme of affordances are the categories of (1) *Non-Face-to-face (NF2F)*, which essentially concerns with the use of e-learning/mediating tools, and (2) *working together*, which relates to the teachers working collaboratively in learning and supporting one another. This theme recorded a frequency of 59 counts in total. Under the category of (1) NF2F, the teachers used a variety of synchronous and asynchronous tools to get in touch with one another and to get access to the study materials, and to work together. It appears that e-learning is used to help them to share knowledge or information, and to discuss and complete their assignments. Interestingly, the in-service teachers did not rely exclusively on Schoology, instead they also used other means of communication such as email, FaceBook, and SMS text messaging.

> *Schoology, and Facebook are the effective ways during Non-Face-to-Face (NF2F) class. As myself, I can accept both learning tools (face-to-face and LMS) for this course (S08).*

> *I don't face any problem with the blended learning- the F2F and schoology- it was a good medium of learning for long-distance students. The schoology, provide us a tools for discussion even when we were apart. During the F2F, more new things delivered for example the wikispace (S29).*

In the case of category (2) working together, the nature of the distance education caused them to be creative to work collaboratively. As all of them are also full time teachers busy with school work and family commitment and teaching in different parts of Borneo, they learn to share ideas, knowledge, experiences, and provided moral support to one another.

> *During the course, I also had the chance of working collaboratively doing tasks, assignments and assessments. Again, I think it was good not only because of the cooperation given by our group members but also I had the chance to learn more about how to use emails, facebook and schoology to discuss our assignments and pass materials to each other. Since we are in different districts, online collaboration was great for us. In other words the process of finishing our tasks and assignments were not just fun but highly informative but at times challenging in terms of connectivity (S15).*

4.2.3 Challenges

The third theme inductively generated relates to the factor of challenges. Challenges in this study are deemed as learning experiences that impeded or perceived as problems affecting the teachers' learning experiences. In terms of frequency count, this theme recorded the smallest number of counts, amounting to 43 instances. The four main categories making up this theme are (1) F2F, which relates to face-to-face lectures and/or tutorials session (2) Internet connectivity; (3) Time; and (4) Language barrier. The F2F category is found to be particularly contradictory in nature. On the one hand, there are requests for more F2F sessions to support the teachers' learning, while there is another group who preferred to have fewer F2F sessions. A classic challenge was the Internet connectivity which seemed to have disrupted their collaboration and gaining access to the resources provided in the learning environment, in particular gaining access to Schoology. Language was also another factor which has dichotomous responses, whereby

a large majority prefer to have English be completely used, and a smaller group suggesting a mixed-language language approach, i.e., be allowed to code-switch between English to Malay and vice-versa wherever and whenever necessary.

> *It's important to have face-to-face with the lecturers and ask them directly our needs in our course and of course meet our friends around Sabah to discuss anything that is unclear (S01).*

> *UMS could use less the time for F2F during the holiday...I don't know about the others but, for me, this is precious time with my kids sob..sob.. (S22).*

> *I am learning more using Blended Learning using Schoology this semester. It is easier for students like me to get information about the courses. This is distance education but internet connection is very poor. It can be a problem, if I lose internet connection when I'm trying to submit or attend the quizzes given. This can affect to the results of the quizzes... so sad....(R33).*

Findings thus far revealed that the teachers generally have positive perceptions of the blended course design. The impact of the blended course on the teachers' personal development, and in particular towards their 'academic maturity', also emanated strongly from the focus group discussions. In particular, two themes seem particularly dominant: (a) BL fosters self-reliance - much more time is spent on trying exercises independently before consulting; they learn to trust their own judgment more; and (b) BL approach helped them to become more independent learners, particularly in self-learning of the modules, and time management. However, there were also a number of drawbacks mentioned, in particular, poor internet connectivity, delayed feedback provided by tutors and peers in relation to online enquiries and task discussion.

4.3 Understanding Contradictions and Tensions Using Activity Theory

Based on the qualitative data analysed and presented, there are a number of contradictions and tensions exhibited. The findings revealed these contradictions occurred within and between the elements of activity systems in this context. These contradictions include issues related to willingness and attitudes towards learning the courses, Schoology and learning materials as tools, opinions related to 'teacher's presence' and collaboration (working together). This analysis revealed four main contradictions, mostly within the following components of the activity system.

4.3.1 Contradictions within the Object Component

A first tension concerned the 'object' of the BL system, i.e, acquiring the knowledge of teaching of listening and speaking and literature in primary schools via the Schoology LMS system and learning modules. Analysis of reflective journals yielded two dominant views regarding willingness and attitudes towards learning. The first concerned a group of learners who seem to want to learn as much as they can. To them, getting to study in the university is an opportunity not to be missed. They are keen to get a deeper understanding of the two courses and therefore were driven to learn the knowledge, and skills, and attitudes required in the learning about the Listening and speaking and Literature courses. As Student 05 puts it,

> *I have waited a long long time for this opportunity (to study in the university) so I'll try my best to learn the knowledge and skills given.*

Another student (Student 02) commented that

> *I checked out all the resources put up by the lecturers and my friends because I wanted to make sure I didn't miss out something important. They are all important to help me to understand the courses better and I visited most to see how they would help me with my assignment and exams.*

However, there was also another pertinent group of learners who seemed just happy to survive the courses, due to reasons of age, time and logistical constraints faced. Student 17 says

> *It's too much to study. I find there are too many resources used – the module, assignments, Schoology and online tutorials that I have to do. I'm not that young anymore and studying part time and travelling for hours to the university can be hard.*

From these contradictions, it appears that there are two different objectives of learning - one that favours learning as much as possible and another that favours just passing the course.

4.3.2 Contradictions within the Mediating Tools Component

A second tension which emerged from the data set pertained to mediating tools, in particular those relating to issues of using Schoology and learning materials. The two courses used a mixed of printed teaching and learning materials (modules, handouts) and information and communication resources (Schoology – uploaded lecture notes, tutorial tasks, quizzes, you-tube videos, and online forum) for the teaching and learning process. When the in-service teachers were asked about the efficacy of Schoology in supporting their learning, most expressed positive views and interest to learn via Schoology. Student 03 says,

> *Schoology is fun to use and it's just like Facebook. I don't have any problem navigating around. The learning resources are also easily obtainable with a click of a button.*

However, when it was pointed out that some of them had made minimal (or no) use of the learning resources provided, a number of the in-service teachers said that they did not mind having a lot of the resources available, but they felt that the materials provided were too extensive compared to other courses. As Student 09 remarks:

> *I feel I'm spending too much time on this course already! We also need to do another 5 courses, so it's a lot to try to cope.*

So it appears that while in-service teachers did not object to the availability of material in terms of online resources, they were overwhelmed by the materials that had been uploaded.

4.3.2 Contradictions within the Rules Component

The third tension which emerged refers to the rules for the BL approach. Firstly, the in-service teachers were encouraged (a) to study the printed materials provided in the module and (b) use the forum to pose questions and problems to the course instructor as well as discuss any issues which they deemed relevant. As in-service teachers reported in the interviews, visiting Schoology on a regular basis to keep up with the course developments posed an extra burden for them. Student 13 says,

> *We are not given a specific time for online discussion so sometimes we need to log on a number of times just to meet with the lecturer for online discussion. This can be a challenge as sometimes I cannot get connected because my place has no*

internet connectivity. Going to the town centre can be difficult if the weather is not good.

As opposed to asking questions in class only, in-service teachers were provided with an opportunity to pose questions in between classes. However, only a few of questions were posted throughout the semester and these were basically about extending the deadlines. The in-service teachers reported that it was more practical to ask the lecturer than posting questions in the forum. Student 01 says,

> *In my opinion nothing can substitute F2F because with the lecturer present there is real-time communication. I don't have to wait for a while to get response. Plus getting the chance to see the lecturer in person is definitely more fun.*

The issue of teacher's presence seems to be a tension which needs further examination and resolution. It supported the earlier qualitative findings where there was disagreement about how much F2F sessions should be provided.

4.3.3 Contradictions within the Division of Labour Component

The final tension which emerged in the activity system was within the division of labour. As stated above, in-service teachers were required to work in small groups of 5-6 to design and develop two separate teaching and learning packages (consisting of lesson plans and materials) to teach the Speaking or Listening skills and the literature component. Collaboration on the project was compulsory and the main course deliverable was a group and not an individual one. Collaboration is highly valued in the course because 'working together collaboratively' is one of the affective domain objectives in the Programme Learning Outcomes (PLO). The joint creation of the teaching and learning package required a great deal of collaboration on the part of the in-service teachers. They need to divide up their work equitably and as such a lot of discussion and decisions had to be made.

In the case of task allocation, the lecturers did not interfere in the group formation and selection. It was done entirely by the students. It was observed that there were no clear criterion used in-forming groups, but most reported that group formation was done mostly on the basis of well-established social relations and locality. Student 02 says,

> *most of my team members are from the district of Tambunan (an interior district in Sabah). It's easier for us to gather together if needed to. However, we tend to FB one another first and if we can't solve the problem we will meet in one of our friends' house to discuss.*

However, collaboration within groups was not always easy and smooth, especially when the group members were not close friends or are situated faraway from one another. Student 05 says,

> *it's not nice to say this but my group is not as collaborative as some other groups. Although we have 5 members in our group, mostly it is just the three of use making all the decisions and doing the work. The other two members seldom reply our texts or log on to FB for discussion. The excuses they always gave were there was no line and they staying too far away to meet.*

Likewise, the issue of collaboration and student-sharing is another contradiction which requires further examination and resolution.

∎5.0 CONCLUSIONS

This study sets out to investigate two main issues; firstly to find out the extent in which the BL approach which combines the traditional classroom learning, tutorial with web-based learning help the in-service teachers in learning the *TW10303 Teaching of Listening and Speaking Skills* and *TW10103 Introduction to Literature* courses, and secondly to investigate and find out more about the learning experiences brought about by the BL system. On the basis of the findings presented and discussed thus far, it appears that the in-service teachers had positive perceptions of the blended course design and Schoology as a platform for learning. The findings seemed to support the positives elements posited by Singh (2010) that BL resource provides greater opportunities to comprehend and extent the knowledge presented. Findings also seem to support Abraham's (2007) study about BL benefiting in-service teachers with more control over learning and fostering critical thinking.

However, there are a number of areas of concern that need further attention and fine-tuning if these positive experiences are to be further enhanced, particularly the contradictions and tensions involving issues relating to 'teacher's presence' (how many F2F sessions needed) and Internet connectively. Gedera & Williams (2013) who examined contradictions in an LMS course in New Zealand found similar contradictions, i.e., problems in downloading materials and 'teacher's presence' may actually interrupt students to express their opinion.

The use of Activity Theory helps us to understand that the BL environment is not a static system. Instead it is dynamic and is always in a state of flux. To ensure effective learning, course convenors, education service providers and all stakeholders involved in the initiative have to continuously carry out monitoring and evaluation of the programme they are offering. Based on the findings presented, it appears that to optimise successful blending, efforts need to be expanded to understand the pedagogical attributes and affordances of new and emerging learning technologies, the most desirable aspects of face-to-face teaching and the ways in which these aspects can be appropriately integrated.

In conclusion, this study, although limiting in its scope and coverage, has answered Ginns and Ellis (2009) call to practitioners to evaluate the contribution of ICT tools to teachers' learning in higher education, especially when used as a complement to the more conventional F2F methods. Thus, for BL to work more needs to be done than merely implement learning changes. A good platform to begin is to start understanding the affordances and the challenges faced in order to come up with solutions that work for all stakeholders involved.

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Appendix A – Questionnaire

ITEMS	SD 1	D 2	DK 3	A 4	SA 5
1. I am in favour of the use of BL to this course					
2. Applying BL in teaching this course made me like this course better.					
3. Applying BL in teaching this course helped me improve all my skills (writing, reading, listening, and speaking)					
4. I find this course easier when applying BL in teaching.					
5. The technique of BL encouraged me to learn					
6. Applying BL for this course enhanced the chance for interaction with the teacher.					
7. I enjoyed talking to others about BL.					
8. I don't like to take part in this BL process if given a choice.					
9. BL helped me learn better.					
10. Applying BL for this course was more delightful and relaxing than traditional methods.					
11. BL was a waste of time.					
12. By applying BL for this course, the chance of interaction with my classmates was enhanced					
13. With BL, I get access to both printed and online materials which helped me learn better					
14. Watching you tube videos and getting engaged in discussion forums					
15. Doing online quiz					
16. Getting to know and use Schoology					
17. The discussion forums increased my writing abilities.					
18. The discussion forums were interesting.					
19. The discussion forums didn't encourage me to interact with my classmates.					
20. The BL content encouraged me to learn.					
21. The online activities on Schoology were related to the course objectives (ILOs)					
22. I hated using Schoology					
23. Using Schoology improved my computer skills.					
24. The instructions provided in Schoology were easy to follow.					
25. I got scared when I operated BL techniques on Schoology.					
26. Schoology was easy to use					
27. Schoology was complicated.					
28. Schoology helped me to use internet effectively.					
29. I felt my knowledge using Schoology was limited compared to my peers.					

Open-ended Questions

What are the THREE POSITIVE experiences you have of the BL system? Why did you say so?

What are the THREE NEGATIVE experiences you have of the BL system? Why did you say so?

Thank you for your time and kind cooperation.