Factors Affecting Arabic Learners' Interest Towards Blended Learning: Further Evidence in University Malaysia Kelantan

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ABSTRACT

E-learning constitutes of learning, training and education programme that involves the use electronic devices. E-learning can be divided into two concepts and operations. Conceptually, e-learning emphasizes learning process that involves the collaborative and constructive interactions using various electronic tools in online learning. In recent years, e-learning has been gradually being introduced to the conventional classroom. This development leads to the introduction of blended learning, which combines face to face and online learning. This study focuses on identifying which of the four major factors, characteristics of lecturers, system quality, technical support and information quality, affect students' interest in blended learning and found. A set of questionnaires was administered to 120 Arabic learners of University Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) and the data obtained were analysed using descriptive quantitative analysis employed through the IBM SPSS 24 statistical software. The findings also show that characteristics of lecturers, the quality of information, technical support and the quality of the system positively affect students' behaviour in using e-learning.

Keywords: Factors, Blended Learning, Arabic Language, Language Learning, e-Learning.

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, the world has seen rapid advances in the field of technology. This has enhanced learning and there is a progressive trend towards its application in formal education which sees a number of higher educational institutions adopting e-learning in the traditional classroom environment (Mohammad Taufiq & Wan Ab Aziz, 2017). Consequently, many universities have incorporated technology in education through different approaches including computer assisted learning (CALL), blended learning and massive online open courses (MOOCs, etc.)(Cimermanová.I. 2018). There are several factors that had led to the extensive use of blended learning and other e-learning approach in the classroom including, the need to improve pedagogy, increased access to technology, higher flexibility of e-learning and cost effectiveness (Norasyikin & Mohd Isa, 2016).

University Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) has launched Learning Management System known as e-campus to exercise blended learning among their community. Blended learning also has been acknowledged and practically instigated in UMK as one of the delivery approaches to conduct teaching and learning processes. To ensure the blended learning approach is successfully implemented, students' and teachers' involvement will be monitored in committed blended learning for the courses in every semester.

This study focuses on blended learning which as defined by Singh (2003), combines face-to-face conventional learning and e-learning through the use of various media, methodologies, activities and teaching aids. Blended learning can be in many forms, however, Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal (2013) explained that all blended learning classrooms share the same features including shifting from lecturer-cantered learning to student-cantered learning, including during face-to-face classes, increased interaction between students and lecturers, between students themselves, between students and contents being taught, as well as between students and other sources of information. Another feature of blended learning is that it provides integrated formative and summative evaluation mechanisms which could reduce lecturers' and teachers' workloads as both summative and formative assessment can be done through one platform.

Blended learning is highly preferred by educators due to its student-centred approach, which is a step away from the traditional teacher centred approach. In this regard, it puts learners in the centre of learning process and students are encouraged to actively participate in discussions, forum and contribute towards the learning (Johan et al., 2014). By putting the learners' need first, the use of blended learning can also benefit students as it allows them to study at their own pace and based on their learning style. Students who are more competent will have extra time and have the opportunity to take part in enrichment activities while weaker students are able to repeat the learning activities until they are competent enough to proceed to next activities (McGinnis, 2005). This in turn can help lecturers to provide balanced and equal guidance to all students, regardless of their abilities.

Consequently, blended learning is deemed as a better alternative to e-learning as it can help deal some issues including the lack of social interactions between students and the lack of holistic learning skills (Norasyikin, 2018; Tayebinik, 2012; Zhang & Han, 2012). Based on the discussion above, this study will examine the use of technology in teaching Arabic as a second language, specifically the factors affecting Arabic learners' interest in blended learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of digital technology has driven educators to embrace technology into the classroom, as part of the Education 4.0 movement. As a result, the integration of technology and ICT into learning has become a new trend among educators (Hashim et. Al, 2018). One of the approaches taken by educators is through blended learning. There are various definitions for blended learning. One of the most widely used definition of blended learning describes that it is the combination of face-to-face learning and e-Learning (S.Brew, 2008), as shown in Figure 1 . Harvey Singh (2003) further explained that blended learning is the use of different media and technologies to complement each other for learning. The introduction of blended learning has improved the delivery of conventional learning by replacing certain aspects of face-to face learning and making it more flexible. In certain institutions, blending learning has cut down the need for classrooms, laboratories, and complex teaching aids. Blended learning also introduces new approaches to allow learners learning to take place in line with the course' or programs' objectives online (Norasyikin & Mohd Isa, 2016).
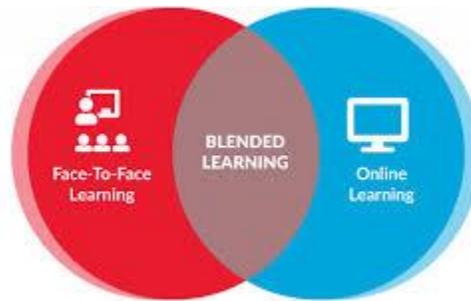
Figure 1. Blended learning concept

 The use of technology in the delivery of lessons has become gradually more common and the use of technology in supporting learning has garnered the interest of many researchers. Studies found that the integration of technology makes the learning process much easier, more flexible and more comprehensive to cater for different learners' need. Studies also reported that the integration of new technologies into the teaching and learning process have gone beyond web-based learning and educators have started to use Augmented Reality, Learning Management system, and gamification as part of their lessons (Wan Ab Aziz et. al, 2018). In the context of second language learning, the use of technology, such as e-learning, can make language lessons more interactive and more engaging. It was further noted that Arabic language educators has started to integrate technologies into the teaching and learning through various ways including blended learning. One notable study is by Hashim et al. (2016) who examine the integration of technologies into the teaching of Arabic and found that this practice could potentially help students to acquire Arabic language skills faster.

There are many previous studies that reported the benefit of blended learning in improving student performance, specifically in second language learning. A study by Fazlijaan et al. (2014) examined the use of blended learning in the classroom and found that most students prefer learning through this approach. The study found that students find blended leaning sessions as more interesting and engaging as teachers use multi-sensory elements such as graphics, audio-visual files and multimedia to deliver the lesson contents. Termit Kaur Ranjit Singh (2014) reported that blended learning could help implement change and improve lesson delivery. Another study by Khairon Nisak et. al (2015) found that blended learning sessions could increase students' self-esteem as students are given more opportunity to be active participants of the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, the integration of technology through blended learning provides students with more opportunity to practice their language skills outside of the classroom. This is supported by Yunus (2018) who mentioned that blended learning allows students to converse and communicate with their peers in Arabic online, providing them with a meaningful way to practice their language skills outside of the classroom. Similarly, Norasyikin (2018), in a study involving Arabic learners in Arabic learning at Unisza, reported that blended learning can increase students' motivation to learn Arabic and consequently, they demonstrate higher achievement. Furthermore, Melor et. al. (2012) advocated the use of digital technology as a social networking tool to enhance students' confidence and motivation in learning and using a second/foreign language. Norliza et. al. (2013) conducted a comparison between lessons that use the blended learning approach and conventional lessons and found students have higher motivation to participate in blended learning activities. In the meantime, Yunus et al. (2013) argued that students' engagement is very important at any levels of study and researchers like Nik Rahimi (2013) and Amalina et al. (2018) have demonstrated that blended learning facilitates a more interactive learning environment which could engage students in learning and stimulate their thinking more effectively. Sabri Sahrir et al. (2016) also found that learners found blended learning lessons more enjoyable as e these lessons provided them with extra learning support, and self-learning option. This will ensure the learning process is not only efficient but also engaging and

enjoyable to the Arabic learners. Thus, it could be posited that blended learning is very beneficial for teachers and students as it could fulfil the current demands and needs of the education system at present.

In regard to the teaching and learning of additional languages like Arabic in Malaysia, several studies have showed that students demonstrated a weak grasp of foreign languages and have little motivation to learn the language (Nur Amalina Faisal et al., 2018). This could be due to the students' anxiety of making mistakes and that the language is taught in the traditional way that does not gauge students' interest and motivation to learn the language.

METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this study is to identify the factors affecting learners' interest towards blended learning in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. This study is a quantitative study and the survey method was adopted to collect the study's data. (Creswell, 2011) The data were collected using a set of questionnaire.

RESEARCH SAMPLING

The sample of this study consisted that 120 randomly selected Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) undergraduate students who are enrolled in the Arabic language course for 2018/2019 semester 2 academic session. The respondents were asked to state their agreement on the statements given on the lecturers' characteristics, system quality, technical support and information quality of the e-campus platform which is used to facilitate blended learning in UMK.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The data for this study were collected using a questionnaire which was adapted from a previous study (Umbit & Muhamad Suhaimi, 2016). The items of the original questionnaire were modified to suit the context of the study. This questionnaire was divided into two parts; Part A consisted of 3 questions which probe the demographic background of the students while and part B contained 29 questions on constructs related to the factors affecting learner's interest towards blended learning, which are lecturers' characteristics, system quality, technical support and information quality.

PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted to test the instrument prior to the full-scale research study. In this study, the pilot study focuses on determining whether the items in instruments are suitable and reliable as well as whether the items in the questionnaire can be clearly understood by the respondents. Subsequently, any improper, incomprehensible or misleading items were amended or removed from the questionnaire. 40 non-respondent students were randomly selected to participate in the pilot study. The number was based on Donald and Pamela (2003) who suggested 25 - 100 participants and Johanson and Brooks (2010) which mentioned that the minimum sample size for a pilot study should be 30. The IBM SPSS Statistical 24 software was used to determine the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of the pilot instrument.

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Item
Characteristics of Lecturers	0.978	9

System Quality		0.958	8
Technical Support		0.955	5
Information Quality		0.965	7
		Total item	**29**

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient

The table above shows the results of the reliability test for each construct. Each of the construct obtained good Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability, as each exceeds 0.9. (Nunnally,1978). This indicates that the items used in this study are reliable.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The main purpose of this study is to identify the factors affecting among undergraduate students' interest towards blended learning in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. The data were collected using sets of survey questionnaires answered by 120 randomly selected UMK students who are enrolled in the Arabic language course. The data from the questionnaire were analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistical 24 software. The descriptive statistics obtained from the analysis were divided into two parts, part A presents the demographic background of the respondents while section B presents the results pertaining the factors affecting learners' interest towards blended learning. The findings are discussed as follows.

SECTION A: RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

This section reports the demographic background of the respondents, specifically their gender age, year of studying in the university, and blended learning experience. The descriptive statistics obtained from the analysis, particularly the frequency and percentage, are presented below;

Item	Sub-item	Percentage (%)	Frequency(N)
Gender	Male	23.3	28
	Female	76.7	92
	Total	**100**	**120**
Year of Study	1	0	0
	2	90	75
	3	30	25
	4	0	0
	Total	**100**	**120**
Faculty	Earth Science	25	30
	Tourism & Hospitality	25	30
	Agro-based Industry	25	30
	Bioengineering & Technology	25	30
	Total	**100**	**120**
Experience with	0-1 year	0	0
Blended Learning	1-2 years	75	90
	More than 2 years	25	30
	Total	**100**	**120**

Table 2: Demographic Background

Table 2 presents the demographic background of the study's respondents. In terms of their gender, 76.7% of the students are female while 23.3% are male students. In the meantime, The majority of the respondents are second year students (90%) from four different faculties. The number of respondents were divided equally across the four faculties, the faculty of earth sciences, the faculty of tourism and hospitality, the faculty of agro-based industry and faculty of bioengineering and technology. Lastly, in regard to their experience with blended learning, 75% of the respondents have 1-2 years of experience with blended learning and 25% of them have more than two years of experience with blended learning.

SECTION B: FACTORS AFFECTING LEARNER'S INTEREST TOWARDS BLENDED LEARNING

There are 29 items in section B which probe on the factors affecting learners' interest towards blended learning. The items in this section focus on four main constructs. the characteristics of lecturers, system quality, technical support and information quality. The data were analysed using the SPSS software to obtain quantitative descriptive data specifically the mean and the standard deviation (SD). The mean score was classified based on the evaluation criteria presented by Nunally (1978), the mean scores between 1.00 and 2.00 are considered as low, mean scores between 2.01 - 3.00 are deemed as medium low, mean scores between 3.01 - 4.00 are considered as high moderate and the mean scores between 4.00- 5.00 are deemed as high.

Item	Mean	SD
1) Lecturers are eager to teach in the classroom.	4.28	0.673
2) The lecturer's presentation style caught my attention.	4.23	0.695
3) The lecturers are friendly with every student.	4.18	0.756
4) Lecturers use blended learning effectively.	4.18	0.694
5) The lecturers explain on how to use the e-campus system.	4.10	0.760
6) Lecturers are happy when we use e-campus to interact.	4.14	0.737
7) Students are encouraged to participate in the classroom.	4.22	0.724
8) Lecturers encourage the students to use e-campus.	4.13	0.721
9) Lecturers active in teaching courses through e-campus.	4.11	0.742

Table 3: Characteristics of Lecturers

As indicated in the table above, a majority of the respondents agree that UMK lecturers are passionate in teaching Arabic language course, with the mean value of 4.28. The respondents also agree that UMK lecturers are using the best practices to attract the students' attention in blended learning (M=4.23). The lecturers The respondents also agree that the lecturers are friendly with their students (M=4.18) and often explain how to use the e-campus site to their students (M=4.10). Most lecturers encourage the students to participate in all classroom activities (M=4.22) to ensure smooth learning process. There is also consensus that the lecturers in UMK are using blended learning effectively with the mean value of 4.18 and the lecturers feel happy when their students use e-campus for interaction and communication (M=4.14). In regard to the use of blended learning in the teaching of Arabic, the respondents agree that UMK lecturers are actively using e-campus platform in teaching the Arabic language course with the mean value of 4.11, and actively encouraging the use the e-campus site for students to learn the Arabic subject (M=4.13).

Item	Mean	SD
1) Using blended learning allows me to choose the topics to learn in my priority order.	4.18	0.682
2) Blended learning allows me to study at what I can afford.	4.15	0.718

Item	Mean	SD
3) Blended learning gives me the flexibility to learn topics anytime, anywhere.	4.23	0.707
4) Blended learning allows me to learn the lessons according to my style of learning.	4.18	0.694
5) Blended learning allows me to get information on online resources.	4.19	0.690
6) Using blended learning allows me to interact with friends and collaborate on assignments.	4.08	0.717
7) Using online courses in line with my lifestyle.	4.12	0.700
8) I learn more in online courses than face-to-face.	3.96	0.864

Table 4: System Quality

The table above illustrates the respondents' views towards the system quality of blended learning platform used for teaching Arabic language in UMK. The results indicate that the participants highly agree that blended learning approach provides them with the flexibility to choose any topics to learn anytime anywhere with the mean value of 4.23. At the same time, blended learning also allows the students to learn the topics according to their priority (M=4.18), their learning style (M=4.18) and based on their lifestyle and preferences (4.15). The respondents also agreed that blended learning benefits them by providing with the opportunity to access online resources (M=4.19), as well as to communicate with their friends and collaborate on assignments (M=4.08). Lastly, the respondents agreed that as digital natives, blended learning approach is in line with their lifestyle (M=4.12).

Item	Mean	SD
1) UMK provides all the facilities I need for blended learning.	4.11	0.742
2) I can access e-campus site using internet provided.	4.13	0.751
3) UMK provides me the opportunity to use the blended learning.	4.18	0.694
4) UMK provides training for me to use e-campus tools.	4.08	0.668
5) There is technical assistance if needed when using e-campus.	3.99	0.783

Table 5: Technical Support

The table above demonstrates the results on the respondents' view on the technical support provided to them in using the e-campus platform. The majority of the respondents agreed that UMK provides them with the opportunity to use blended learning throughout their study with the mean value of 4.18. The respondents also responded that they can access the e-campus site using the WiFi facility in the campus (M=4.13). They also agreed that the university has provided them with the facilities needed for blended learning (M=4.11) and the university has taken various efforts by providing special training to use the e-campus platform (M=4.08). Furthermore, the respondents agreed that the technical staff always provide the assistance they needed when using the e-campus site (M=3.99).

Item	Mean	SD
1) Course contents provided are sufficient.	4.12	0.712
2) Course contents are related to the subject.	4.18	0.673
3) The e-campus component structure is easy to understand.	4.13	0.681
4) Finding information on course content through the e-campus is easy.	4.16	0.698
5) Course materials are always available throughout the semester.	4.13	0.744
6) Course materials are uploaded on time.	4.11	0.719
7) I like online courses rather than face to face courses.	4.02	0.830

Table 6: Information Quality

The table above illustrates the information quality of the blended learning approach used by Arabic lecturer in UMK. The results indicate that the participants highly agree that the contents available through the e-campus platform are related to the course they are taking with the mean value of 4.18. Furthermore, there are agreements that the lecturers provide sufficient information in the platform (M=4.12) and they upload all the materials on time (M=4.11). The respondents also agreed that the e-campus platform makes it easier for them to find information about the courses they are taking (M=4.16) as well as to do their revision because all of the course materials are uploaded into the e-campus platform throughout the semester (M=4.13). They also agreed that the e-campus platform is user friendly and easy to understand (M=4.13). In the meantime, most respondents mentioned that they prefer to learn through the online platform rather than attending face to face classes (M=4.02) because it allows them to learn according to their own pace, learning style and to choose any topics they want learn without any restriction.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study have several implications towards the students, the lecturers and the institutions, specifically UMK. This study has highlighted several factors that need to be addressed by the institution in Implementing the blended learning approach. The survey results show that lecturers' characteristics significantly influence students' interest towards blended learning in UMK. In general, the respondents have positive view towards blended learning as their lecturers are passionate in using blended learning in the teaching process. Furthermore, the lecturers have helped the students to see the benefits and advantages of using blending learning and this has increased students' use the e-campus site for online learning and their positive attitude towards it This indicates that the proactive actions of lecturers will positively affect the implementation of blended learning in an institution. This finding also demonstrates a more positive perspective towards the use of blended learning for Arabic language courses which used to be delivered through the traditional chalk and talk approach.

Another significant finding is that despite being in the same year of study, the respondents have different level of experiences in using blended learning. In this regard, the lecturers need to have computer skills to handle blended learning and help support students to use the platform. Furthermore, the lecturers should provide good quality electronic materials and upload materials into the e-campus site on a timely basis. This has helped attract students to use the platform optimally for the learning and to meet the demands and needs of the current education system.

The survey also reported the majority of the students have positive views towards blended learning approach. This could be because the use of e-learning suits their lifestyle and as digital natives, they highly prefer using technology for learning. As blended learning is a student-cantered approach where lecturers act as facilitators, the students feel that that blended learning allows them to participate actively in the teaching and learning process and they can use their technology skills in the learning process. At the same time, the extensive use of e-learning will help students develop higher technology skills required to keep up date with the information provided through the e-campus platform. This approach also presents a brand-new dimension in the teaching and learning of Arabic language as it creates an interactive learning platform which could student s' thinking more effectively. Consequently, Arabic language course designers could include blended learning as a learning approach as it allows students to learn and practice the language skills through online mediated approach to complement face to face instruction. This will allow students to experience the best practice in both settings.

This study also shows that institutions should be aware of the needs of lecturers and students. Courses and training on content development This is because content quality is crucial as the availability of high-quality materials could increase students' interest towards using blending learning. At the same time, lecturers and students need to be taught on how to use e-campus effectively should be provided to lecturers as good computer skill will ensure that the platform will run smoothly. Educational institutions should also provide better internet facilities to enable lecturers and students to use blended learning effectively. High speed and stable internet coverage will allow lecturers and students to access the e-campus site anytime anywhere within the campus. In addition, the university's technical staff should provide real-time assistance to lecturers and students when they face any problems when using the e-campus site.

CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the factors affecting Arabic learners' interest towards blended learning. Past studies have demonstrated the various benefits of using blended learning and this paper extent the previous studies by presenting the factors affecting learners' interest in using blended learning for learning Arabic language. It was found that lecturers' characteristics significantly influence the implementation of blended learning and how students' use the approach. In this light, lecturers' positivity in implementing blended learning as a teaching and learning approach will encourage their students to use blended learning. Information quality also influence students' interest towards blended learning. At the same time, educational institutions should improve the system quality, internet facilities and provide sufficient technical supports to sustain the interest of users.

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