

ISLAMIC JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL EFL TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE IN BLENDED LEARNING: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The growth of technology has encouraged educators to incorporate technology into learning, leading to dynamic learning environments, such as blended learning. This research delves into teachers' experiences and challenges in teaching English using blended learning techniques. Using a qualitative case study method, two English teachers from a junior high school were interviewed about their experiences with blended learning. Results showed that initial apprehensions about blended learning were overcome with school support. Technical readiness and infrastructure are crucial for successful implementation. Blended learning was found to enhance students' motivation, performance, and engagement in English language classrooms, fostering skills like communication and teamwork. Students benefit from the interactive nature of blended learning, combining online elements with face-to-face interactions.

Keywords: teacher experience, blended learning, junior high school, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning has gained prominence in the education sector, especially in Indonesia's transition to the new normal era post-COVID-19 pandemic, and related to the 5.0 industry growth. The approach combines face-to-face teaching with online elements, enhancing flexibility and adaptability to changing circumstances. Institutions offering blended learning can switch between in-person and virtual formats, ensuring continuity even during disruptions. This method not only broadens their reach to a diverse student body but also helps English language educators use innovative strategies like integrating real-life events and genuine information, fostering active language use beyond the classroom. Overall, blended learning optimizes student engagement and learning outcomes by marrying traditional teaching with modern technology. Blended learning has become an essential approach in education, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic (Nong et al., 2023).

Studies over the past five years have predominantly focused on the application of blended learning in higher education, highlighting its effectiveness in various teaching methods and learning styles. However, current research shifts attention to the experiences and challenges faced by English teachers in Islamic Junior High Schools in implementing this approach. Despite numerous obstacles, teachers' efforts to adopt blended learning demonstrate its viability even at lower educational levels, enriching language learning through increased student independence, engagement, and practical application.

For instance, research by Hayati et al. (2021) examined Senior Secondary School teachers' experiences and challenges in Malaysia and Indonesia, while Ma'rufa & Mustofa (2021) focused on EFL teachers' professional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other notable studies include those by Cunningham (2021), Ju and Mei (2018), and Aldosemani et al. (2019). The ongoing exploration of teachers' experiences aims to refine blended learning strategies, ensuring they cater to the dynamic needs of modern education.

Furthermore, related to ELT, blended learning is an educational approach that combines face-to-face instruction with online learning and is becoming increasingly prevalent due to technological advancements. Defined by Graham and Misanchuck (2004), blended learning merges traditional classroom methods with distance learning to create a diverse and interactive educational environment. Graham (2013) emphasizes its effectiveness in integrating various delivery models, teaching methods, and learning styles. This method facilitates reflective thinking, personalized learning, and differentiated instruction (Pardede, 2012). Recognized as efficient for education, training, and professional development (Arkhipova et al., 2018), blended learning supports multiple learning styles through synchronous and asynchronous technologies. In English language teaching, it combines the benefits of face-to-face interaction with the flexibility of online learning, enhancing student motivation, engagement, and proficiency (Ivanova et al., 2020). Therefore, blended learning is more than a simple mix of online and traditional methods; it is a thoughtfully designed system focused on learning objectives and a student-centered educational environment.

Moreover, blended learning has demonstrated greater success than solely face-to-face or online education (Brodersen & Melluzzo, 2017), with research highlighting superior outcomes for students in blended learning environments compared to traditional settings (Smith & Hill, 2019). This approach supports independent and autonomous learning, allowing students to study at their own pace (Linder, 2016). According to Kaur (2013), blended learning offers several benefits: it shifts classrooms from passive to active learning environments, accommodates diverse learning styles, and provides both face-to-face and online interactions. Blended learning enhances student engagement, accountability, and individualization, leading to higher motivation and improved educational outcomes. It effectively combines technological advancements with traditional methods to meet course objectives and student needs, offering flexibility and accessibility while maintaining direct interaction (Kaur, 2013). This integration ensures comprehensive learning experiences, balancing direct instruction and independent study opportunities, thus addressing the transformative effects of technological advancements in education.

However, several studies have shown that the implementation of blended learning faces several challenges, including some educators' reluctance to adopt it due to the perceived time-consuming nature of preparing online materials (Maarop & Embi, 2016). Teachers must dedicate additional time to developing course platforms and assessing online work, which increases their workload (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). Additionally, the lack of technical proficiency among some faculty members affects student engagement (Krasnova & Shurygin, 2019). Other issues identified include insufficient faculty training, language barriers, and inadequate technological infrastructure (Aldosemani et al., 2019; AlKhaleel, 2019; de Dios & de Dios, 2016). Despite these hurdles, the benefits of blended learning, such as flexibility and enhanced learning autonomy, are significant. To overcome these challenges, strategic planning, training, and institutional support are essential (Alvarez & Abel, 2020). Effective blended learning requires addressing pedagogical, social, emotional, technical, and logistical challenges to create successful and engaging learning experiences.

Besides, related to the teacher's experience, blended learning has been shown to enhance the performance of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers by allowing more time for communicative activities, which increases student comfort and motivation (Alfahadi et al., 2015). It offers various instructional options, enabling flexible participation in discussions without time or location constraints (Graham & Misanchuk, 2004). In Indonesia, challenges include the need for better proficiency in online platforms and reduced engagement due to misunderstandings of instructions (Pardede, 2019). Effective autonomous learning methods should be prioritized in this context (Sukardjo et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, blended learning significantly benefits students' skills and knowledge (Handayani et al., 2020), and it

enhances motivation by incorporating real-life scenarios relevant to students' work environments. Therefore, recognizing teachers' experiences and providing professional development is crucial for successful implementation and improved teaching outcomes.

In conclusion, blended learning specifically in the higher education field enhances student engagement, motivation, and outcomes by merging traditional teaching with technology. Despite challenges like increased teacher workload and technical proficiency needs, the benefits, such as flexibility and improved learning, make it valuable. Effective implementation requires strategic planning, training, and support, along with leveraging teachers' experiences, to create a balanced, student-centered learning environment.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to deeply explore the experiences and challenges of implementing blended learning in English instruction at a Junior High School. This approach is appropriate for thoroughly investigating the core phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, allowing researchers to gain comprehensive insights into their experiences (Creswell, 2007). The data were gathered through interviews, focusing on teachers' firsthand experiences with blended learning, aiming to enhance understanding and inform potential improvements in teaching methods.

The qualitative data collection included interviews and document analysis, which are effective for obtaining extensive and detailed information (Carr et al., 2019). This method is particularly beneficial in the educational field, providing valuable insights that can be used to modify and improve teaching practices (Kozleski & Handy, 2017). The study's objective was to explore the implementation of blended learning in lower education settings, specifically focusing on the experiences of English teachers in Junior High Schools.

Primary data were collected through interviews with teachers at Qordova Islamic Junior High School, chosen because it actively implements blended learning. The study involved two English teachers, one with over five years of experience and another with less than five years, using purposeful sampling to gather diverse insights. This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' experiences and challenges in using blended learning for English language instruction.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, which allowed for in-depth and comprehensive information collection (Kallio et al., 2016). This method facilitated the exploration of teachers' proficiency and difficulties in implementing blended learning. The intentional selection of participants and the research site aimed to gather rich, detailed data that address the study's objectives and contribute to improving blended learning practices in English language teaching at the Junior High School level.

Once the data were gathered, they underwent a systematic analysis through six processes outlined by Creswell (2007). First, the data was organized into folders, with large volumes replicated to reduce risks. Second, data was analyzed and programmed by coding into categories such as teacher experience and barriers. Third, the data were encoded to construct descriptions and themes, addressing the primary study inquiries about Islamic Junior High School EFL teachers' experiences with blended learning. Fourth, findings were presented and documented in written form to elucidate the challenges teachers faced. Fifth, results were analyzed to gain a comprehensive understanding of these experiences, using personal perspectives and comparisons with previous studies. Finally, the precision of the results was verified through interviews and document analysis to ensure data accuracy.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the research were attained from the interview session. The interview was conducted with two English teachers at Qordova Junior High School. Based on the research

questions, this chapter is reported in two sections. The first section is to figure out the Junior High School EFL teachers' experience in using blended learning. Meanwhile, in the second section, this study describes the Junior High School EFL teacher's challenge. The interview was conducted with two English teachers at Qordova Junior High School. Based on the research questions, this chapter is reported in two sections. The first section is to figure out the Junior High School EFL teachers' experience in using blended learning. Meanwhile, in the second section, this study describes the Junior High School EFL teacher's challenge. The research results are based on the research questions.

Teacher's Experience in Blended Learning

This first section focused on the Junior High School EFL Teacher's experience using blended learning in teaching English. Two of the English teachers in the Islamic Junior High School of Qordova, who are currently teaching English by implementing blended learning, were interviewed. There were nine questions in the interview. They were intentionally selected to provide further information due to their availability and willingness to share their experiences. The interview was conducted on June 22 and 24, 2023, at the Islamic Junior High School of Qordova in Rancaekek, Bandung.

1. The School Role in the Success of Blended Learning

The school has a big role in the success of Blended Learning. In an effective model, teachers serve as coaches or mentors rather than mere providers of knowledge. They guide students through the learning process, emphasizing active participation and personalized experiences. According to the findings of the interview, teacher one, who initially had the impression that blended learning was strange, started to like utilizing blended learning as a result of the school's support for the adoption of blended learning. Technical Readiness should assess their current technical infrastructure, including wireless networks, hardware, and software to support the online aspect of blended learning. The implementation of blended learning initially emphasized the use of supporting applications, with some teachers feeling unfamiliar and unprepared. Over time, as teachers gained confidence and adapted to the technology, the approach became more structured and organized, positively impacting the teaching experience. Proficiency in using digital tools is crucial, as it allows teachers to create engaging learning experiences. Professional development programs that enhance technological confidence are essential for successful integration (Dogan et al., 2021). Teacher confidence, perceived skills, and support play significant roles in influencing educational experiences, leading to more captivating and efficient learning environments for students. Accordingly, the interview results for the first question were as follows.

“Initially, blended learning in this school existed because of online learning during the pandemic. During the pandemic, teachers were required to master the school's LMS called eLearning, which was provided by the school, so that all teaching and learning processes were integrated into one line through eLearning. There, teachers and students can access lesson plans, meeting schedules, and study reports. After the pandemic period, the LMS is still used; it is arranged in advance in the annual work meeting, so that in one month, learning through blended learning must be carried out at least once.”

“Blended learning is planned in advance during the annual work meeting. This is a continuation of the pandemic. In the beginning, all teachers felt pressured to master school eLearning for online learning. For now, Blended learning is not frequent, but the use of blended learning in the e-learning aspect may include e-learning from school, Google Forms, or Quizziz at least once a month” (personal communication, June 22, 2020).

Hence, the success of blended learning is heavily dependent on institutional support. Here are some crucial variables, such as policy and decision-making. Clear policies that explicitly support the adoption of blended learning are necessary for institutions (Ali & Georgiou, 2024). Decisions ought to follow the objectives of the institution and the requirements of the students. Infrastructure and technology. Having a sufficient technology infrastructure is crucial. Assistance for learning management systems (LMS) and other technologies guarantees a seamless execution. Effective institutional support ensures that teachers receive thorough instruction and remain up-to-date on best practices. School support teams provide assistance during technical difficulties, gather feedback, and implement necessary improvements. This support motivates educators to adopt blended learning, creating a conducive environment for teachers and students to thrive (Johnson et al., 2016), as attached below, in accordance with the interview results for the third question.

“I completely agree, the school and foundation supported the online learning aspect of blended learning. As previously mentioned, the school even makes its own LMS, namely eLearning SIT Qordova. In eLearning, students can access the learning schedule, assignments, assessments, and report cards can also be uploaded to eLearning. Wi-fi service for internet access is also provided by the school” (personal communication, June 22, 2020).

Providing pedagogical training necessitates instruction in blended teaching methodologies. Providing pedagogical support assists them in creating successful blended courses. Meanwhile, constant review and assessment ensure the quality of the teaching and learning process. Institutions ought to assess the influence of blended learning on student achievements. In addition, fostering community involvement by creating a supportive community, both through online and offline means, improves student engagement. Peer support networks enhance the effectiveness of blended learning (Han et al., 2019).

Essentially, for blended learning to be successful, it is crucial to have a strong dedication from the institution, well-developed infrastructure, continuous training for instructors, and active participation from students (Antwi-Boampong & Bokolo, 2022). When teachers initially focus on using supporting applications and gradually become more comfortable, it can lead to a smoother implementation process. The structured approach likely helped create a sense of organization and reduced stress for teachers.

2. Blended Learning Increased Students' Motivation and Response in Class

Blended learning can indeed have a positive impact on student motivation and participation in the classroom. By combining face-to-face interactions with online elements, students often find learning more engaging and interactive. It also caters to individual needs, allowing students to learn at their own pace and access materials from anywhere. It extends learning beyond physical classrooms. Based on the answers from T1 and T2 to the interview questions number nine, what motivates students to learn is the 'closeness' between today's children and technology.

“The students were happy and responded positively because the use of the internet in learning English felt close to them, as those who were familiar with the internet and technology, whose instructions often used English, understood better. Moreover, blended learning is not held every meeting” (personal communication, June 22, 2020).

Students are accustomed to using digital devices and online platforms. The use of blended learning leverages this familiarity, making the learning environment more comfortable.

However, blended learning significantly enhances student motivation and performance, particularly in English language classrooms. In terms of classroom engagement, blended learning facilitates teachers in actively engaging students in the learning process (Nong et al., 2023). Through integrating traditional classroom instruction and online elements, students are

exposed to a diverse range of learning modalities. This engagement fosters the development of crucial abilities, including communication, information literacy, creativity, and teamwork, which are vital for achieving success in language learning. Students have the ability to retrieve online learning materials from the Learning Management System (LMS) whenever they choose to review the topic. Blended learning is well-suited for junior high school students who already have access to the internet and gadgets. Teachers have observed that students enjoy bringing their cell phones to school and engaging with digital resources under the teacher's supervision, as attached below, in accordance with the interview results.

“At the junior high school level, the use of blended learning is suitable. Because students feel there is variety and a new atmosphere from the boredom of learning. They are happy because they can bring their cell phones to school rather than using them for less useful things. The internet and cellphones should be directed into learning media, but still directed and limited only as a learning support tool” (personal communication, June 24, 2020).

Blended learning allows students to utilize digital resources, language applications, and interactive exercises outside of the classroom due to its combination of face-to-face instruction and online components under the teacher's guidance (Pardede, 2019). Utilizing technology equips students with essential skills for navigating technology, promoting active participation, and proficiency in language. Teachers have found that blended learning enhances their technology literacy and makes managing instructional materials easier. In addition, blended learning enables students to acquire knowledge and skills at their preferred speed by autonomously accessing and utilizing educational materials and resources. This adaptability accommodates various learning styles and preferences, hence augmenting motivations. Incorporating technology into several aspects of a system or process. Utilizing digital tools and platforms in blended learning fosters student engagement through exploration, creation, and interaction (Sabowala & Mishra, 2021).

Furthermore, Technology is essential for encouraging learners, whether through online chats, instructional videos, collaborative projects, or vocabulary enhancement. As previously stated by T1 and T2, it is important to maintain a proper equilibrium between blended learning and other methods in traditional classroom settings. Blended learning fosters motivation and active involvement in English language classrooms by creating a dynamic and learner-centered atmosphere.

Therefore, blended learning is highly effective for junior high students with internet access, combining face-to-face and online instruction to foster engagement through interactive activities and multimedia. Teachers have found that this method enhances their technology literacy and simplifies managing instructional materials. Blended learning varies in implementation but is consistently successful in teaching English as a second language, integrating various instructional techniques and digital elements. It positively impacts student motivation and interest, providing access to global resources and enhancing collaboration and time efficiency. Student reactions are generally favorable, driven by familiarity with technology and curiosity about new applications. Personalizing the curriculum based on student interests helps create a supportive and enjoyable learning environment.

Challenge the EFL Teacher Faced when Implementing Blended Learning

The second section focuses on the Junior High School EFL Teacher's experience using blended learning in teaching English. The source is two of the English teachers in the Islamic Junior High School of Qordova who are currently teaching English by implementing Blended Learning. The interview questions in this section are four questions (Question 9- Question 13). They were intentionally selected to provide further information due to their availability and willingness to share the challenge that they faced. The interview was conducted on June 22 and 24, 2023, at the Islamic Junior High School of Qordova in Rancaekek, Bandung.

1. The Lack of Training in the Online Aspect of Blended Learning

One of the most significant issues for educational institutions is delivering appropriate training to teachers and students in order for them to reap the benefits of blended learning's online component. One possible explanation for educational institutions' reluctance to provide effective training support to teachers and students for online component activities in blended learning is that educational institutions believe that face-to-face interventions require less training for both teachers and students and that teaching blended courses does not require extensive technological and online instructional training and support when compared to fully online learning.

As a result, any difficulties or challenges encountered during the online component can be clarified and resolved during the in-person meetings. Cost is another factor contributing to institutions' unwillingness to provide good teacher training support. For example, not all institutions can cover the cost of 'quality matters' professional development for their professors. Because blended learning teachers who are not funded by their institutions for such professional training may fall short of delivering the promise of blended learning to their students. The absence of proper instruction in the online component of blended learning might indeed provide difficulties.

Nevertheless, due to fear of technology and self-assurance, certain educators may have technophobia or lack self-assurance when it comes to utilizing online resources. Training can effectively address these problems and enhance educators' proficiency in implementing blended learning approaches (Safford & Stinton, 2016). Teachers require a comprehension of effective online pedagogy, while the faculty necessitates assistance in comprehending how to develop and execute efficient online teaching tactics. Learning management systems (LMS) are crucial tools for educators, but it is essential for them to understand how to effectively utilize them (Shand & Farrelly, 2018). Nevertheless, the availability of computer laboratories and restricted access to computer laboratories or devices can impede the implementation of blended learning. Institutions must ensure that all educators have equal access. Moreover, there may be some teachers who exhibit reluctance towards technology-based learning, as shown below, in accordance with the interview results for question number 10.

“Teachers also have to adapt and learn first, sometimes there is a new learning application or web, but there is a lack of introduction.”

“Personally, there is no escaping human error, and using new applications or media also requires learning and adapting from the beginning” (personal communication, June 24, 2020).

However, it can be concluded that this difficulty can be addressed by emphasizing the advantages and offering appropriate training. Investing in training and professional development can equip educators to effectively overcome these challenges and fully embrace blended learning.

2. Device and Internet Access Availability

Internet connectivity is an essential mode of access to online components in blended learning, as it requires teachers and students to have access to technology. Based on the interview, it was found that slow internet access has an impact on the teaching and learning process, as it consumes time just to connect to the internet service. Teachers have to compete to access the internet provided by the school; therefore, in the end, teachers or students use their internet quota. In addition to both hardware and software, whether provided by themselves or by their educational institution, the challenges of technological accessibility cannot be ignored (Shand & Farrelly, 2018).

However, in addition to both hardware and software, whether provided by individuals or their educational institutions, the issue of internet accessibility cannot be disregarded. In response to interview question three, the teachers expressed that both teachers and students lack equitable access to the internet and support, and need to use their own internet quotas if the internet is inaccessible during the teaching-learning time, as explained below.

“Internet access is limited because students sometimes do not have a quota, as access to the school wifi is limited. It is a hindrance because sometimes it wastes time waiting for an internet connection. Sometimes, if you want to use the internet via a computer in the computer lab, you have to compete with other classes because this school belongs to a foundation, so you also have to compete with SMA IT.”

“Sometimes the application is in error, so documents that have been entered into the application are lost, or suddenly go down, even though the school is quick to respond, but yes, it takes time. Well, even though it's online, teachers still go to school. Often fighting over wifi. Yes, if you want it to run smoothly, you have to use your personal data” (personal communication, June 24, 2020).

Similarly, the research conducted by Safford & Stinton (2016) revealed that teachers encountered challenges with internet connectivity in their online component, as well as difficulties in managing obsolete equipment. Teachers and students may perceive the implementation of blended learning as an unfair method of instruction, as it may result in unequal access to online learning technologies compared to their classmates.

Implementing blended learning poses significant challenges due to the adaptation process and teachers' proficiency in online learning. Teachers need sufficient time to explore and understand each program or website that facilitates the online component of blended learning (Tampus & Calyawa, 2023). The task of creating online teaching materials is often more time-consuming than preparing for face-to-face instruction, leading some to view ICT as demanding. Thorough investigation ensures that tools align with learning objectives and reduces potential difficulties during instruction. Teachers' proficiency in using technology requires regular practice and continuous professional growth. Professional development programs are essential for improving digital literacy and teaching effectiveness. Although the initial time commitment is substantial, understanding and utilizing technology proficiently enhances the overall quality of the blended learning experience.

Students face challenges in the online component of blended learning, such as access to the internet and the necessary media. Younger students may not have their own devices, making it difficult to participate in online learning. Achieving a balance between face-to-face and online components is crucial for effective blended learning. Schools often face issues with internet connectivity and resource availability, which hinder the full implementation of blended learning. Addressing these challenges requires strategic planning, enhanced coaching and training programs, and providing adequate resources and technical support. As teachers continue to innovate and adapt, blended learning offers promising opportunities for personalized instruction and global connections, preparing students for a technologically oriented world (Liu et al., 2017; Ibrahim & Ismail, 2020). The future aspiration of educators includes clear guidelines for incorporating creative media, scheduling assistance, and equitable access to necessary tools and resources.

In order to effectively address this challenge in the future, the teacher expects that the institution to successfully manage the equal distribution of internet access and the scheduling of computer laboratories. This will ensure that the process of teaching and learning English through online media in the blended learning element is not disrupted.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study is to show the reader the importance of being technologically competent and literate in this day and age. Collaboration between sophisticated technology and a wide variety of teaching materials can help teachers as mentors easily deliver material to students, especially in terms of student scores. Meanwhile, students are helped in deepening their understanding of teaching materials, which some may find difficult if school facilities are inadequate, such as the availability of a language laboratory for listening classes, and the flexibility of time. The results of the interview session were answered, and the research question was divided into two parts. The experiences first and the challenges that they face. In the first phase, ten questions were used to explore the extent of their experience using blended learning in teaching. Then, for the second part, there are just four questions for the enclosure. The first teacher's (T1) experience was that implementing blended learning initially placed an emphasis on being able to use supporting applications, while the second teacher (T2) still felt unfamiliar and did not know much about the blended learning approach. However, when implementing blended learning in English language teaching, the teachers initially had the impression that blended learning was something strange and started to like utilizing blended learning as a result of the school's support for the adoption of blended learning. Technical Readiness should assess their current technical infrastructure, including wireless networks, hardware, and software to support the online aspect of blended learning. Furthermore, blended learning helps improve students' motivation and response to learning English in junior high school. Particularly in terms of increased collaboration between sophisticated technology and a wide variety of teaching materials. Blended learning significantly enhances student motivation and performance, particularly in English language classrooms. In terms of classroom engagement, it fosters the development of crucial abilities, including communication, information literacy, creativity, and teamwork, which are vital for achieving success in language learning. Meanwhile, students are helped in deepening their understanding of teaching materials. Furthermore, blended learning was implemented in a more structured manner which made teachers more relaxed and organized in implementing it also the impact on the student, with the support of the institution in providing online software and hardware, blended learning is applicable in lower education English language teaching classrooms.

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