



EFL students' perceptions of blended learning in English language course: learning experience and engagement

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Abstract

The importance of blended learning has been emphasised during the current restriction caused by the coronavirus diseases 2019 (COVID-19). But there is a scarcity of studies on students' learning experience in blended learning, particularly using *WhatsApp* as one of the learning tools. A combination of classroom meetings and online learning is implemented in a vocational university in Indonesia. The research reported in this article aims to examine students' perceptions of their learning experience in a blended method of learning incorporating social media *WhatsApp* and *Google Classroom* application as learning instruments. The dataset includes a questionnaire consisting of a four-point Likert scale and open-ended questions, a recording of *WhatsApp* chat history, and students' work in *Google Classroom*. Data analysis uses a multi-methods approach. Descriptive analysis is used for the closed-ended questions using the Excel program and content analysis for the open-ended questions. Results show that students positively perceive their learning experience in blended learning. Students also articulate their concerns of the internet connection and instruction clarity on the online learning materials. This paper highlights some implications of the research findings including the lecturer's need for professional development that may enable them to help students succeed in blended learning.

Keywords: blended learning; COVID-19; Google Classroom; online learning; WhatsApp

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Introduction

The increasing use of technological devices has been reshaping the style of education. Currently, many education providers, including universities in Indonesia, respond to this millennial era by modifying or even changing their curriculum (Zubaidah, 2018) by the inclusion of digital gadgets in the learning process. The Indonesian government recently advised university leaders to adopt online learning in a hybrid mode into their curricula (Bramasta, 2020; Zainuddin & Keumala, 2018).

The hybrid mode of learning is also known in some contexts as blended learning. It is a combination of face-to-face classroom meetings and online learning mode. There are different models of blended learning, such as *Flex* and *Online Driver* (Thompson, 2016). The first one adopts a gradual introduction to an online mode, and the latter is an independent virtual class. With the combination of traditional face-to-face classroom meetings and online learning, blended learning is perceived to be the most productive type of learning (Lubkov et al., 2020) in some aspects. First, it may allow for greater chances and flexibility to support student's individual learning needs (Thompson, 2016). Additionally, it can minimise some potential risks from the use of digital tools on the students' learning. For example, due to some technical issues, learners might lose the value of knowledge. Furthermore, using digital tools may cause students to degrade their nature of living as human beings (Lubkov et al., 2020).

The online mode of learning is believed to have some benefits. First, it can help facilitate access to quality education (Lauren et al., 2014; Okaz, 2015). In addition, it may be beneficial to students in terms of pace and space. Both students and teachers may have the flexibility of setting their schedules. Furthermore, the implementation of online learning, which commonly requires the use of gadgets like laptops or mobile phones, allows students to learn in any place, even when they are mobile. In particular, the recent restriction caused by

the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has made a virtual mode of learning have the potential to be implemented in education. In addition to its flexibility of time and place, online learning can help enhance students' learning experience. They can gain more understanding of the content of the lessons (Cakrawati, 2017; Okaz, 2015) because the online mode would allow for extending students' learning experience outside the classroom (Lauren et al., 2014). Moreover, the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) instruments can provide students with digital learning strategies (Cakrawati, 2017; Kim & Bae, 2019), skills that are necessary in today's world (Schwab, 2015). In addition to online materials provided by the teacher, social media like YouTubes can be used in language learning nowadays.

Incorporating online learning into blended learning of the English language classes can also give some benefits to the learners, especially those who are in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In addition to a greater possibility to provide students with various learning activities, the use of different kinds of social media like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *WhatsApp*, which are available in current mobile phones, is possible to enhance language learning experiences. Current smartphones, featured with voices and texts, may enable language learners to practice the four skills of language (Kukulka-Hulme et al., 2015) in online learning.

However, blended learning is newly introduced in the context where this reported research was conducted; therefore, a case study was done to examine students' perspectives on their experience of blended learning in English language course. The research particularly sought to investigate the benefits and challenges encountered by the students. As online learning is commonly associated with the use of portable devices like smartphones and notebooks (Burston, 2014, Sharples et al., 2010) to enable the mobility of learning, the term mobile learning is also used in this article and mentioned as a reference to the term online learning.

To date, several studies on the practice of online learning in foreign language classrooms have been conducted in different settings. Klimova and Polakova (2020) focused their study on the benefits of vocabulary learning using a mobile application. They specifically examined 28 students of the third-year study in a university in the Czech Republic. Their study found that students perceived that vocabulary learning using a mobile application helped them learn their English course but stated that the mobile application was less supportive of practicing communication skills. The finding suggests the type of

learning tool used by the lecturer reflected the features of the lesson objective, which was to provide better preparation for an examination. A similar study was conducted by Gamlo (2019) in a university in Saudi Arabia. Most EFL students in her study agreed that online learning helped improve their English language and learning autonomy. Both of the findings of the studies indicate a need to match the students' learning needs with the content presented in the learning tool. The study of Gamlo (2019) also highlighted students' need for training of ICT tools uses, which was also evidenced in a study conducted by Karsenti et al. (2020) in some Russian educational institutions. Examining both students and teachers' opinions of the use of digital technologies in online learning, the findings of their study highlighted teachers' needs for professional development that may enable them to help students succeed in the online learning environment (Karsenti et al., 2020).

Several studies on learners' perception of blended learning have also been done (Alaidarous & Madini, 2016; Annamalai, 2019; Çırak Kurt & Yıldırım, 2018; Gyamfi, 2015; Gyamfi & Suksemuang, 2017; Huang, 2016; Ja'ashan, 2015; Wright, 2017). Some studies evidenced university students' positive perception of blended learning. For example, the study done by Huang (2016), investigating 296 non-English program students of higher education in southern China, found that more than half of the students preferred blended learning to either online or offline learning. His study also examined students' opinions about the role of both types of learning mode, and they perceived both online and offline learning modes as interdependent in supporting their learning. Some similar studies in different contexts were done by Alaidarous and Madini (2016) in Saudi Arabia, Annamalai (2019) in Malaysia, and Gyamfi (2015) in Africa. While the first two studies revealed that students' familiarity with the learning instrument contributes to their perspectives, the third study found that students' basic computer and internet skills appeared to contribute to students' positive perception of blended learning. To further investigate these issues, Wright (2017) examined students' preference for each learning mode at a university in Malaysia. The findings showed that out of 112 students, less than 5% of the students chose a combination of the learning modes, 50% of the students preferred face-to-face classroom meetings, and 37.5% opted for online lessons. Students said the reasons for choosing a face-to-face mode of learning was because of a better understanding they could attain through this traditional method of learning where direct access to teachers' help and guidance was available.

In Indonesia, few studies (Rerung, 2018; Rianto, 2020) showed students' positive attitudes towards blended learning. Rianto (2020) used a questionnaire to ask students' opinions of using a university e-learning system in their course. The students said the e-learning was useful in their learning but articulated some technical issues and a slow internet connection to be its drawbacks. Rerung (2018) focused her study on examining 30 students' perceptions of blended learning in English listening and speaking skills. Her study had similar results to those of Huang's (2016) study and found that the majority (21) of the students preferred having blended learning. The students said that the traditional classroom meetings supported them to learn in the online learning environment. While a specific reason for this preference of blended learning was not asked in her research instrument, it was presumed that students' dependence on the teachers is still considerably high. This presumption was linked with the rating they gave to the statement about technical issues in online learning mode as a difficult level (Rerung, 2018). This particular concern of technical problems was one key issue to be examined in this reported study.

Challenges in using digital tools in online learning, however, are evidenced in some studies. First, students' lack of IT knowledge (Holley & Oliver, 2010; Okaz, 2015), other technical issues, and insufficient network stability (Rerung, 2018; Rianto, 2020; Sari & Wahyudin, 2019; Yamin 2020), are challenges, which might hinder students from learning successfully. Moreover, there might be limited opportunities for the students to practice spoken communicative skills. It is argued that the majority of mobile learning used a transmission approach where the use of mobile devices appears to deliver content rather than to improve learners' communication skills (Burston, 2014). Another challenge of implementing the online learning mode is maintaining students' learning engagement. To address this problem, the provision of feedback on the students' performance even via ICT tools (Levy in Gyamfi & Sukseemuang, 2018) could be useful. Some studies have shown students' positive perceptions of the feedback given to their work (Chen et al., 2016; Getzlaf et al., 2009). The study by Getzlaf et al. (2009) found that supportive feedback facilitated postgraduate program students' confidence in learning. The study conducted by Chen et al. (2016) in a university in China indicated that students' positive feelings towards the lecturer's feedback on the error they made in content and grammatical features. In the research context, no studies on the examination of students' learning experience in blended learning, particularly utilising *WhatsApp* in the teaching and learning process. All of the

aforementioned concerns were the focus of this reported study. Thus, this study aimed to seek the answers to the following research questions:

- (1) What are the students' perceptions of their learning experience in the blended learning of the English course?
- (2) What are the students' perceptions of enabling and disabling factors to their engagement in blended learning of the English course?

Method

Research design

Using survey research, a case study was undertaken in an ELT classroom at a vocational university in Indonesia. It was done by the course lecturer to gather information about students' perceptions of their English learning experience in blended learning. The instrumental case study (Stake, 2000) was selected to provide some insights about students' experience when learning the English language in a blended mode of learning. The course, labeled as *English 2*, adopted the English for Specific purposes (ESP) approach that uses discipline knowledge as a guideline for language learning (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Participants

There were 61 first-year students (N=61) from the Faculty of Marine and Fisheries Sciences participating in the research. The students were informed about this study before the course commenced and asked for their voluntary participation to complete the questionnaire. Their participation in completing the questionnaire was considered as their approval to take part in the study. There were 54 students who completed the survey. Table 1 presents the research participants' demographic information.

The research reported in this article was conducted in the classroom of first-year students after they had experienced blended learning in the first semester (Simbolon, 2019). In this research, blended learning was implemented in their course using *Google Classroom* and *WhatsApp*. *Google Classroom* was to substitute the University e-learning system which was used previously and found less supportive by the same students. *WhatsApp* was chosen for a few reasons. First, it was low technology and hence less challenging to use. This social media is the most popular amongst the students at the University. Second, *WhatsApp* was expected to address the issue of the limited improvement in communication skills in online learning (Kukulska-Hulme et

al., 2015) because it incorporates written and spoken texts which can be used for language learning. This particular reason became an issue the research intended to address, i.e., one main tool of online learning.

Table 1. Research participants' demographic information

Socio-demographic items		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Study program	Fish Capture Technology	26	48.1
	Fisheries Products Technology	28	51.9
Gender	Male	38	70.4
	Female	16	29.6
Age	16-17	2	3.7
	18-19	39	72.2
	20-22	13	24.1
Ethnicity	Malay	41	75.9
	Dayaknese	4	7.4
	Others*	9	16.7

*Others includes Buginese, Bataknese, Padangnese and Javanese

Research instrument

The questionnaire design came from a review of the related literature on the implementation of online learning, its benefits, and challenges. The survey consists of two parts: closed questions, which were developed to address the first research question, and open-ended questions for the second research question. The closed-ended questions use a four-point Likert scale concerning the issues around mobile learning in the English course, and the open-ended questions explore the factors which have enabled the students to and hindered them from learning successfully in the blended mode of learning.

In addition to the questionnaires, a record of the group chat via *WhatsApp* was used for data analysis. Data from *WhatsApp* were used to provide support to students' responses to the questionnaire. Activities in *WhatsApp* focused on practicing English speaking in several topics including family, hobbies and English. The course was presented in *Google Classroom*. The syllabus focused on procedural texts incorporating the topics 'How to Use A Fishing Gear' for the students of the Fishing Technology study program and 'How to Breed Fish' for those in the Aquaculture program. For the final examination, students were asked to submit a five-minute video PowerPoint presentation of a procedural text.

Research procedures

The course comprises 12 weeks of learning sessions excluding the mid and final examinations. The face-to-face instruction was given on the first two weeks and the last meeting of the course, which was prior to the final examination. In addition to introducing the course, the initial meetings aimed to familiarise the students with both learning tools used in the course. The last meeting was meant to prepare the students for the final examination. The online mode was presented between the weeks of face-to-face meetings. After the whole syllabus was completed, the students were asked to complete the questionnaire, which was available online in *Google Classroom*. The *WhatsApp* group chat history and students' work on *Google Classroom* were recorded to corroborate their responses in the survey.

Students' responses to the open questions of the questionnaire were analysed and categorised into two main themes: the enabling and disabling factors to the student learning engagement/participation in English course. Each theme was divided into three main issues raised by the students. The issues are presented in Figure 4 in the Findings section.

Data collection

Data from the survey were collected at the end of the semester in 2018. The questions were presented in the Indonesian language. The survey consisted of ten items: one multiple-choice question, seven four-point Likert items, and two open-ended questions. Students' responses were in Indonesian, the language shared by both the researcher and the students. For this article, an English translation of students' responses was made. Students' names are replaced with numbers such as STU1, STU10, and STU20. Pseudonyms are used for the *WhatsApp* group chat responses.

Data analysis

Multi-method approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) were used for the data analysis. A descriptive analysis was done for the closed questions using the Excel program and content analysis for the open-ended questions. Tables 2 and 3 show the statistical results of the validity and reliability of the closed questions.

Table 2. Validity test*

Instrument	Item	Validity
1.	English 2 course is fun	.690
2.	Chatting via <i>WhatsApp</i> group helps improve my communication skills in English	.844
3.	English 2 course benefits in the improvement of my English skills in general	.604
4.	The mobile learning in English 2 course gives me some skills in using technology/IT	.734
5.	Receiving feedback on the tasks in the English 2 course helps improve my English skills	.633

**p-value* < .005

As indicated in Table 2, validity test results show that the correlation value (*r*) count is in the range of values of .604 and .844. The R table value for 54 respondents at the 95% significance level is 0.228. The result shows the value of R arithmetic was greater than the value of R table, indicating that the questionnaire is valid. Next, the reliability test of the instrument items was done, and the statistical results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Reliability test*

Instrument	Item	Reliability
1.	English 2 course is fun	.579
2.	Chatting via <i>WhatsApp</i> group helps improve my communication skills in English	.579
3.	English 2 course benefits in the improvement of my English skills in general	.579
4.	The mobile learning in English 2 course gives me some skills in using technology/IT	.579
5.	Receiving feedback on the tasks in the English 2 course helps improve my English skills	.579

**p-value* < .005

Table 3 shows the *r*-value count is 0.579 for all five instrument items. These statistic results indicate a significant correlation value as this value is greater than the *r*-value of the table (0.263), which shows that the instrument items are reliable.

Findings

Students' perceptions of their learning experience in the blended learning of the English course

The overall findings showed students' positive responses to blended learning in their English course. They specifically perceived the improvement in their vocabulary learning using social media, referring to the benefit of gaining skills when using ICT tools. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Statistical results of the questionnaire

Instrument item	Mean	SD*	4	3	2	1
			SA F4 (%)	A F3 (%)	D F2 (%)	SD F1 (%)
English 2 course is fun	3.37	0.52	38.9	59.2	1.9	0
Chatting via <i>WhatsApp</i> group helps improve my communication skills in English	3.30	0.71	42.6	46.3	9.2	1.9
English 2 course benefits in the improvement of my English skills in general	3.37	0.52	38.9	59.2	1.9	0
The mobile learning in English 2 course gives me some skills in using technology/IT	3.31	0.67	42.6	46.3	11.1	0
Receiving feedback on the tasks in the English 2 course helps improve my English skills	3.35	0.48	35.2	64.8	0	0

*SD=Standard Deviation; SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree; F=Frequency

As shown in Table 4, the findings show that overall students enjoyed learning in the English 2 course. Specifically, the majority of the students expressed their agreement with Statement 1 'English 2 course is fun'.

This positive perception appears to link with the benefits they experienced during the course. Students gave the same ratings to the statement 'English 2 course benefits in the improvement of my English skills in general' and Statement 1. The low score of SD in both statements indicates a low disparity of the students' responses to the statement. Furthermore, students' responses in the open-ended question specifically mentioned the improvement of their vocabulary learning. Some students explained this way: "I can deepen my understanding of correct vocabulary" (STU34) and "My vocabulary

improves" (STU40).

Next, students were also asked about their perception of each learning mode and the tools used in online mode. Figure 1 displays the findings.

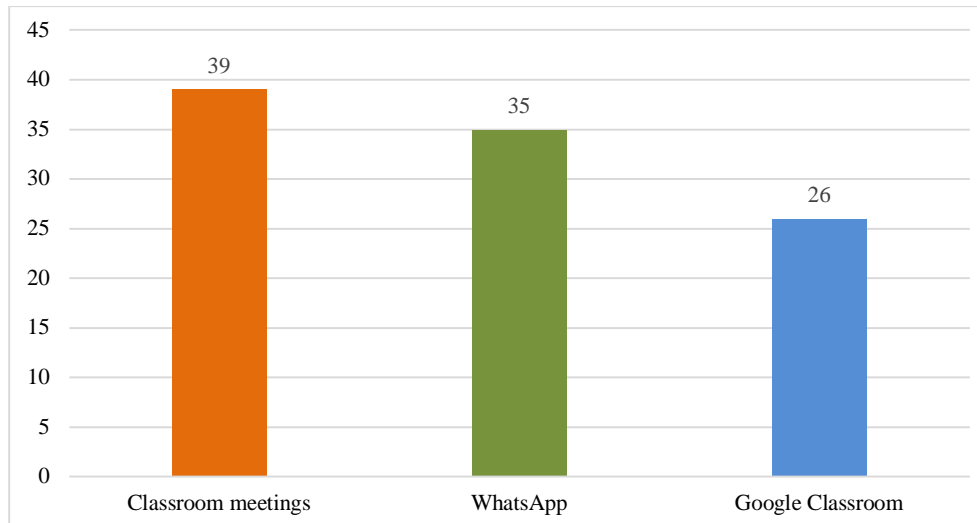


Figure 1. The number of students preferring classroom meetings and the tools used in online learning mode (in percentage)

Figure 1 shows that 39 % of students still favoured classroom meetings, which slightly outnumbered the groups that preferred the two types of online learning media. Students preferred *WhatsApp* to the other online learning tool. The positive attitude towards this social media was reflected in their learning engagement in the *WhatsApp* activities. Figure 2 presents this assumption.

As indicated in Figure 2, more than 50% of the students participated in all topics, and most students took part in Topic 4. It is also worth noting that the teacher provided an example of both writing and recorded audio text (see Table 5), and students were asked to perform their tasks in the form of audio recordings except in Topic 4, where they were asked to provide both spoken and written texts.

In addition, approximately 90% of the students indicated their agreement that *WhatsApp* helps improve their English communication skills. Furthermore, their positive attitude towards the use of this social media was augmented by students' responses to the open-ended question regarding the benefits of online learning. For instance, students said that "Chatting via *WhatsApp* is interesting as no face-to-face meetings are required" (STU3) and "Chatting via *WhatsApp*

help vocabulary improvement and increase motivation to learn English.” (STU6).

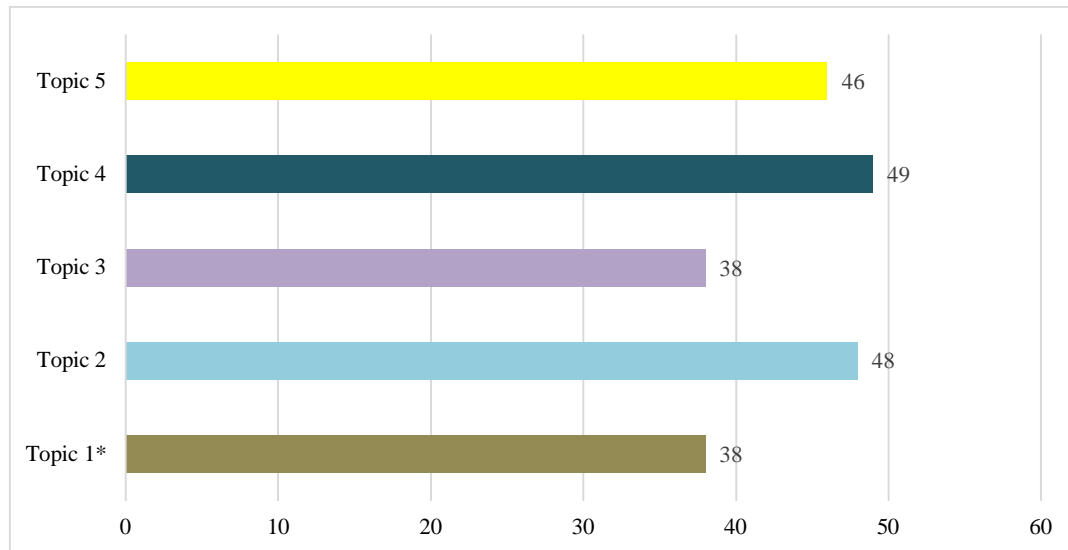


Figure 2. The number of students participating in the speaking practice activities via *WhatsApp*

This positive perception appears to be caused by the flexibility of pace and space of learning using social media. Some excerpts of a sequence of *WhatsApp* chats in Table 5 presents the time of each message, which supports this suggestion.

As indicated in Table 5, such flexibility of time can be seen firstly from the time of the teacher's posting on a topic in a group chat, which was after class hours. In turn, the students were allowed to provide their responses at any time convenient for them before the due date.

Apart from language skills, the students perceived that mobile learning mode improved their use of digital tools for learning purposes. The majority (89.9%) of the students stated they gained skills of using technology through online learning. This perception seems to be related to their learning participation using the tools as indicated in Figures 2 and 3.

Despite more students favouring face-to-face classroom meetings compared to the online mode, it is worth noting Figure 3 shows that while 26% of the students chose *Google Classroom*, the number of students' engagement in this learning media nearly doubled during the three-month program. It is worth noting that the materials were accessible in the mobile application on the first week of the course. In the first week, only a few students could complete

Table 5. Some excerpts of communication via *WhatsApp*

Time	Chat user	Message
15/04/2018, 19:39	Teacher	Good evening, everyone. This week's topic for WA group chat is "Tell me about one person in your family. Her/his name and personality. How is your relationship with him or her?" (audio file attached).
15/04/2018, 19:40	Teacher	I would like to tell you about one family member in my family. He is my youngest brother. His name is Kerne. He is shy, quiet, but fun. We have a good relationship, I think. We do sometimes, have a chat via WA and share about our thoughts and ideas. Thank you
15/04/2018, 21:49	Ahmad	I want to tell you about one family member in my family. He is my big sister. We are 10 years old. His name is Indah. He was grumpy, cheerful, but fun. We have a good relationship because he who replaced my mother after the mother died. He sometimes calls me to advise me. Thank you.
15/04/2018, 21:50	Ahmad	(file attached)
15/04/2018, 22:29	Teacher	Excellent. Saya perbaiki dengan tanda huruf besar. ok? [My correction is in the capital letter, ok?] I want to tell you about one family member in my family. SHE is my big sister. She IS 10 years older THAN I AM. HER name is Parida. SHE IS grumpy, cheerful, but fun. We have a good relationship because SHE IS THE ONE who replaced my mother after the mother died. SHE sometimes calls me to advise me. thank you
15/04/2018, 22:51	Echan	I want to tell you about one family member in my family. She is my sister. Her name is Diah. She is beautiful, incredible; she is the best I have for now.
15/04/2018, 22:52	Echan	(file attached)
16/04/2018, 14:00	Ryan	I want to tell you about one family member in my family. He is my brother. His name is Rangga. He is a generous and caring person with his brothers. Now he works in Malaysia and he is busy with his work. He rarely comes home and I miss his moment with him. Thank you

the tasks, but Figure 3 also indicates that most students completed the tasks within three months of time. Some students seem to encounter challenges to complete the tasks because they missed the due date to complete the tasks (Nouns and Connective Word). This finding augments students' responses to open-ended questions where some of them mentioned a need for a longer time to complete the tasks. They said: "The due dates of tasks need considering" (STU12) and "The timeline is the problem" (STU25).

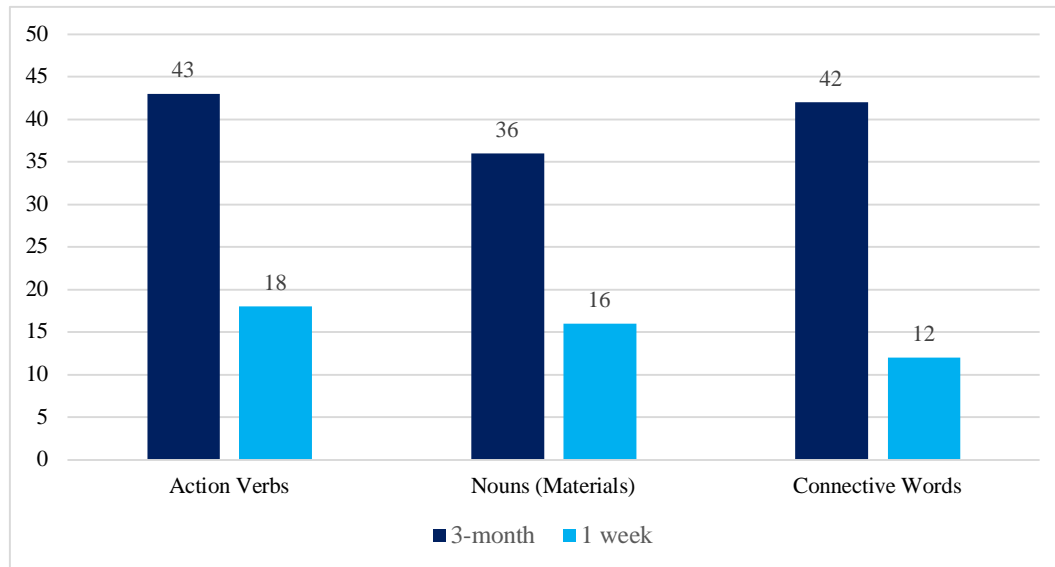


Figure 3. The number of students completing tasks via *Google Classroom* within one week and three months of time

It is also worth noting that students held positive attitudes towards receiving feedback on their work. All of the students stated their agreement to the statement 'Receiving feedback in the tasks in the English 2 course helps improve my English skills.' Receiving feedback on the students' work when learning in the online mode may have a link with their participation in the learning process using this tool. The classroom teacher also made the students know that feedback on their work would be provided. For example, Table 5 shows that after the first student presented his work, the classroom teacher gave information about her intent and the way of providing feedback on their work. The feedback seems to be noticed by another student (Echan), who expressed his phrases with limited errors in similar grammatical aspect his fellow classmate made.

Students' perceptions of enabling and disabling factors to their learning engagement in the blended learning of the English course

Students' responses to the open-ended questions suggest the importance of selecting a type of online learning tool suitable for the students' needs and teachers' skills in teaching online courses. Their responses are presented in Figure 4.

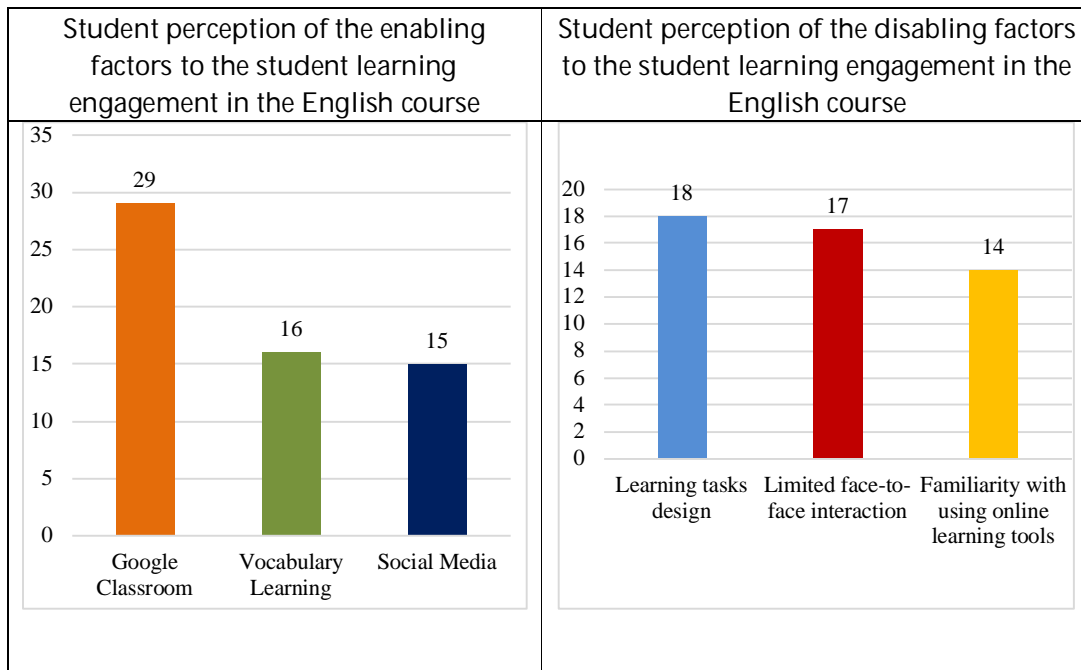


Figure 4. The number of students perceiving the enabling and disabling factors to the student learning engagement in the English course

As shown in Figure 4, more than half of the students had a positive opinion about *Google Classroom*. It is worth bearing in mind that this reported study was a response to a need for improvement in the University e-learning system that was less supportive of the students, this positive perception may reflect the students' appreciation towards their voices being heard. Furthermore, this figure could be linked to the benefits they obtained when learning online. Some students expressed: "... We can get to know *the Google Classroom* and *Google Docs* and can further improve our skills of using the IT-related tool." (STU1), 'working on weekly assignments in *Google Classroom*." (STU16), and I can use the *Google Classroom* application properly and this has increased my skills." (STU 20). Some students mentioned the name of the learning tool, and others described it as relating to the internet like the following "... all is very useful for me because I can find out how to learn using

the internet." (STU15).

Nevertheless, a few students indicated some inter-related issues they encountered during learning online, which included limited familiarity with the learning tools, interaction with their fellow students and lecturer, clarity of the learning tasks. It is worth noting that Figure 4 shows a considerable number of students who considered the lack of familiarity with the online learning tools as an obstacle they encountered when learning online. Some students mentioned these technical issues as follows "I don't understand [how] to use *Google Classroom* in my cell phone." (STU40). "Files cannot be downloaded nor be edited directly in *Google Classroom*." (STU20).

In addition to these technical issues, Figure 4 indicates that approximately 30% of students articulated a need for well-designed learning tasks. They expressed it in various ways: "In my opinion, it's better to give assignments that are not difficult for us to understand and to do" (STU12), and "Nothing, but giving us easier tasks" (STU21). The following student made a specific mention of clarity in the learning tasks: "A clear instruction in the rubrics of online learning materials is necessary" (STU46).

It is also important to note that the number of students raising the issue on the design of online learning tasks was similar to those who perceived limited interaction with the teacher to be a disabling factor in their learning online. Students' limited knowledge of using the learning tools seems to contribute to a number of students expressing their preference for traditional classroom meetings. The same student mentioning this technical issue said: "It would be nice if there is sufficient time learning in the classroom." (STU40). A comment by another student seems to further support this perspective: "We should often discuss it again in the classroom." (STU8). Other students expressed similar ideas in a more direct way "The frequency of face-to-face classroom meetings needs to be increased so there is an interaction between the teacher and the students which makes learning easier and this greatly helpful" (STU2) and "In my opinion, more frequent classroom meetings are necessary to help me understand the lesson." (STU26).

Discussion

The findings indicate that there are some factors contributing to students' positive perspectives on blended learning. First, their familiarity with the learning tool can influence their motivation to participate in learning, as evidenced in the studies of Alaidarous and Madini (2016) and Annamalai

(2019). For instance, the use of *WhatsApp* can be effective in this reported study because it reflects students' interests. Furthermore, this application is relatively simple to use. It is worth noting that the role of social media in this reported research in this article has a different role from the studies in Annamalai (2019) and Šebo and Haškova (2020). Another factor contributing to the perceptions of students of blended learning is their awareness of the benefits they receive. The finding of this research was in line with the results of Klimova and Polakova's (2020) study regarding students' positive perception of the vocabulary learning improvement when using the mobile application and of Gamlo's (2019) concerning students' positive perception of the benefits of using digital devices to develop English language skills. This positivity also seems to have contributed to their learning participation.

In addition to the use of ICT devices, it is worth examining the role of feedback in student learning engagement. The provision of feedback on student learning (oral and written) seems to enable their participation in online learning. Hence, this particular finding is in line with the results of the studies done by Getzlaf et al. (2009) and Chen et al. (2016), where supportive feedback on student performance has provided such learning opportunities, which in turn increased their learning engagement.

The findings in this reported study have some implications. First, there is evidence that in this reported research context, the introduction of online learning needs to be done gradually through blended learning. A gradual introduction of online learning may help students familiarize themselves with the tools. Similar to the findings of previous studies (Alaidarous & Madini, 2016; Gyamfi, 2015; Huang, 2016; Rerung, 2018; Wright, 2017), face-to-face classroom meetings are helpful and can be arranged as a session to provide better access to the teachers' support in task completion. In this way, learners still can maintain the main features of their human nature by intermingling with other people in a specified time (Lubkov et al., 2020).

Another implication is that ELT teachers need to be supported with professional development. Firstly, they need training of providing technical support to their students. Some potential technical issues of working on a learning tool like *Google Classroom* for the first time need to be addressed before using the instrument. There are some practical ways of implementing blended learning where adequate support can be provided to the students. First, face-to-face classroom meetings can be presented between units of a lesson where a brief description and guidelines are given to students. Second, traditional

classroom meetings can be set before a new format of online learning is introduced. For example, when learning activities utilise audio-visual materials, it is recommended that traditional meetings provide students with training of ICT use for learning. In other words, the allocation of sufficient time is necessary to familiarise the students with the online learning tools (Annamalai, 2019; Gamlo, 2019; Okaz, 2015).

Furthermore, teachers need training of giving clear instruction for online learning tasks that are different from the tasks to be done in the traditional classrooms where the students can access support from the teacher directly when they encounter unclarity in the tasks. Unclear guidance in online learning mode may hinder students from participating in learning activities that can influence their learning outcomes. All in all, it is the teachers who first need the support of professional development on pedagogy and the operation of ICT tools of learning (Karsenti et al., 2020), which in turn, can help students with relevant support in blended learning.

Conclusion

The research aimed to investigate student perceptions of their English learning experience in blended learning. Students' responses to a questionnaire and *WhatsApp* group chat history and students' work on *Google Classroom* were incorporated into the dataset. A mixed-method approach was used for data analysis. The study found that students experienced some benefits from blended learning using social media like *WhatsApp* and from the feedback on the work they received from the lecturer. It also reported that there was an improvement in students' vocabulary learning suggesting the potential of social media to play the role of one main tool of blended learning. *WhatsApp* seems to be potentially used to practice language skills online. The research also revealed students' concerns in blended learning, that include the lack of clarity about the learning tasks and their limited familiarity with the use of ICT learning tools. Some practical implications for blended learning are discussed including selecting an online learning tool that fits the students' needs, provision of relevant and sufficient support for the students in each mode of learning, especially in terms of addressing technical issues when learning online. The findings of this study also highlight ELT teachers are the stakeholders who first need professional development, especially in the design of online learning tasks. Hence these skills may help them to enhance the student learning experience.

The limitation of this study is that no targeted assessment of students' achievement of their vocabulary learning was undertaken, suggesting this topic to be included in future research. In addition, this study cannot be generalised into any other ELT context, but some aspects can be transferrable. For example, in the contexts where *WhatsApp* may not be applicable, other social media like *Twitter* is worth investigating in future studies.

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