Blended Learning in a Reading Course: Undergraduate EFL Students' Perceptions and Experiences

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Abstract

Research on blended learning in reading course especially is limited. This study aimed at revealing the implementation of blended learning in reading course for undergraduate EFL students at one public university in South Sumatera and the students' perceptions on the e-learning incorporated in the blended learning in the reading course. The study was carried out through a qualitative method using a case study approach. The first semester students, consisting of 13 female and 5 male students, majoring in English Education Study Program at a public university in South Sumatera participated in this study. The researchers used observation, documentation, and semi-structure interviews to collect the data. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively. The findings covered two major issues in accordance with the research questions: the implementation of the blended learning and students' perceptions of the e-learning. The findings showed that in the reading course, 4 meetings were conducted with e-learning and 12 others were employed in the classroom with various activities. In terms of students' perceptions, the students reported some advantages and challenges that they encountered in e-learning. This study also provided some implications and recommendations for further research.

Keywords

Blended learning, e-learning, reading, undergraduate EFL

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Introduction

Education field is constantly changing in order to keep the pace with the dynamic world such as the phenomenon of Industry 4.0 which has brought enermous rapid changes in education. The old-fashioned teacher-centered approach now has shifted to a student-centered approach which is facilitated with more sophisticated ways of learning such as digital learning with the use of ICT and internet (Eryansyah, Erlina, Fiftinova, & Nurweni, 2019; Haryanto, Sulistiyo, Fransiska, & Yose, 2019; Mercado & Ibarra, 2019; Prasojo et al., 2019). In relation to this phenomenon, an increasing number of universities have encouraged a new digital learning culture, such as blended learning.

Blended learning is a combination of face-to-face and online learning by utilizing the benefits of online classes without completely losing the advantages of the face-to-face instruction (Hadiyanto, 2019; Muhaimin et al., 2019; Mukminin et al., 2019; Vernadakis, Giannousi, Derri, Michalopoulos, & Kioumourtzoglou, 2012; Syaiful et al., 2019). Hockly (2018) adds that the utilization of computer technology integrated in the blended learning is frequently considered to be carried out in different places from the face-to-face instruction, and mostly in the students' own time. Further, Bataineh and Mayyas (2017) explain that blended learning incorporates both of in-class and online instruction, which offers different variations of teaching and learning methods (e.g., lecture, discussion, guided practice), delivery modes (face-to-face vs. computer mediated), and modalities (e.g., synchronous vs. asynchronous) to improve the teaching and learning. Thus, in other words, blended learning is the mix of two learning modes: face-to-face classroom and online classroom to get all of the learning benefits of both modes.

The incorporation of blended learning into the English language teaching has attracted massive attention. Many studies have reported the use of blended learning in the teaching and learning of different English language aspects such as vocabulary (Djiwandono, 2018; Tosun, 2015) and grammar (Aslani & Tabrizi, 2015) and English language skills such as listening (Rahmawati, 2019), reading (Radial, 2019; Setyawan, 2019), speaking (Chen, 2015), and writing (Liu, 2013; Muhtia, Suparno, & Sumardi, 2018). In reading course, students are demanded to have abundant practices of reading to improve their reading skill. The more students are exposed to English reading activities, the better their reading skill will be. In relation to this, blended learning fits to this demands as students can have more practice in-class and online class and eventually results in the improvement of reading skill. As reported by Djiwandono (2018) and Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) in their studies, EFL students experienced higher reading scores after they were taught by using blended learning. The blended learning had facilitated the learners in their attempt to develop their reading comperehension skill. Additionally, Ang and Yunus (2018) argue that it is beyond doubt that the ICT integration in teaching and learning activities triggers students' motivation to read texts on screen rather than in their book. ICT has its attractiveness which can increase students' attention when it comes to reading compared to reading texts on paper (Habibi et al., 2019).

Despite the growing interest in blended learning approach in English language teaching, there have been few studies which investigate thoroughly how the blended learning is actually implemented along with students' voice regarding their experience of the online class (e-learning), especially in a reading skill. Recent studies were mostly aimed at comparing students' reading achievement with and without blended learning in reading courses. Investigating the blended learning implementation in a reading course and students' voice about their e-learning in the blended learning of reading course based on their perceptions will provide some insights and guidance for EFL teachers to design blended learning for reading courses which matches students' needs and preferences. This is supported by Onet-Stelma, Slaoti, and Motteram (2013) who highlight that adult learners possibly have well-built thoughts about what works for them and how they would like to learn. In relation to the use of technology, this serves as a strong filter. Their preferences may be because of positive or negative learning experiences; they may be culturally situated; they are ground for negotiation to facilitate the adult learners to have the most impactful learning.This present study, thus, aimed at revealing the implementation of blended learning in a reading course and students' perceptions on the implementation of e-learning in their reading course. These aims are formulated in research questions: (1) How is the implementation of blended learning in a reading course for undergraduate EFL students at one public university in South Sumatera? (2) What are their perceptions on the e-learning incorporated in the blended learning of the reading course?

Literature Review

Blended learning

Blended learning has attracted many scholars' attention which results in various definitions of blended learning based on their own perspectives. For example, Milad (2017) defines blended learning as the utilization of various technologies, pedagogies, context, and delivery modes in order to make a strategic combination which results in improvement on students' success. It is also known as the integration of technology-based materials and traditional print materials. Tawil (2018) argues that it is called blended learning when there is an integration of two instructional media, where one represents the traditional methods used in the traditional classroom where face-to-face interaction is used, and the other a technological mode of instructions of relaying information to the learners.

Graham (2006) claims that blended learning is implemented in one of the different levels, namely: (1) activity level: when an activity integrate both face to face and technology-based elements then blending at the activity level takes place. (2)Course level: the blend in course level occurs when the distinct face to face and computer mediated activities are integrated. (3) Program level: in this program level, blending can be used through either of these two models. In the first model, the learners choose a blend between face to face courses and online courses and the second one is a combination between the two which is arranged by the program. (4) Institutional level: some of the institutions carry out the

blended learning by integrating face to face and computer mediated instruction. Many organizations besides institutions of higher education are making models of blended learning at an institutional level. Regarding the levels of blended learning discussed above, Graham (2006) mentions that the level of blended learning is determined by the learner or designer/teacher. Learners usually can make a choice at the levels of institutional and program. While designers/teachers usually decide at the course and an activity level.

E-learning

E-learning as part of blended learning needs to be understood well about what it actually entails. Clark (2004 as cited in Soong, 2012) explains that e-learning is any different approaches used in instruction which these approaches integrates ICT. Further, in more detail, Milad (2017) explains, "e-learning courses consist of multimedia presentations, simulations, combinations of animations, video and audio sequences, text commentaries and last but not least, learners' knowledge checking tests" (p.28). Thus, when e-learning is dicussed, then ICT comes up as it is always unseparable aspect of e-learning (Habibi et al., 2018; Marzulina et al., 2018). Solak and Cakir (2015) emphasize that the most crucial features of e-learning lie on the separation of teacher and student in synchronized or non-synchronized activities, and students conduct these activities on their own. This individual activities result in students' learning independence and self-directed learning process regardless students' ages. Al-Dosari (2011) explains that in the asynchronous mode, the interaction of the users does not need to takes place at the same point in time. This includes e-mail, miling lists, file download, hypertext publication (i.e.: www), and newsgroups/bulletin. In synchronous mode, simultaneous engagement between participants is required, for example audio-videostreaming and videoconference, chat, and whiteboard.

Methodology

Research design, respondents, and locale of the study

This research employed a qualitative approach, specifically a case study. A case study is employed when a bounded system, for instance activity, event, process, or individuals, is investigated through an in-depth analysis of data collected extensively from multiple sources (Creswell, 2012; Erlina et al., 2019; Habibi et al., 2019; Mukminin et al., 2017). This study took place in an English Education Study Program of a public university in South Sumatera. The researchers chose this university because in this university the reading course was carried out through blended learning and the online learning was done with the help of e-learning site provided by the university. Besides, this university got an A for its accreditation, so that the blended learning at this university can be a model for others. Therefore, the researchers were interested in exploring deeply the implementation of blended learning in reading course for undergraduate EFL students at this university and the students' perceptions on the e-learning incorporated in the blended learning in the the reading course.

The researchers chose participants of this study by using purposive sampling. Thus, all of the freshmen of class taking "Literal Reading" course which was conducted through blended learning took their part as the participants. The participants were 5 male and 13 female students. Their range of age was around 16-18 years old. In this study, pseudonyms were used for the sake of participants' confidentiality.

Data collection and analysis

In this study, observation, documents, and semi-structured interview were carried out to collect the data. These procedures were used to answer the first question reated to the blended learning implementation, while to know students' perceptions on the e-learning students were involved in a one-to-one interview by using semi-structured questions to get in-depth information. Prior to all of the data collection process, the researchers introduced themselves and informed all of the participants the aims of the observation, documents, and semi-structured interview and the participants agreed to be observed, answer and show any documents they had related to the implementation of the blended learning.

Observation was done by observing the activities conducted in the face-to-face in-class instruction for several times until the description of the activities were well-established. During this observation, field notes were used to record the activities. Then, document was conducted by visiting and examining the website, i.e.: https://lp3mpunsri.gnomio.com/ used for e-learning. Students activities for the whole semester covering 16 meetings were described in the e-learning website. The last, semi-structured interview were also used to investigate how the blended learning (in-class and online learning) was implemented and their perceptions on the e-learning (online class). During the interview, students were free to answer in English or their mother tongue in order to convey their ideas freely without language barriers. The interview with each student was video-taped and transcribed and translated into English. The collected data were the analyzed qualitatively. The steps of analyzing the data followed the procedure described by Creswell (2012) and Mukminin et al. (2017) by organizing and preparing the data, reading through the data, coding the data into categories, building themes, representing and reporting the findings, and interpreting the data. To build the trustworthiness, triangulation was used by incorporating different data collection methods (i.e., observation, documentation, and interview) to confirm the data validity from different sources. Besides, member checking was also carried out to confirm the credibility and control of biases by returning the transcribed interview text back to the participants and asking them for its accuracy.

Ethical considerations

This study was dependent on human beings as the key basis of the data. To cope with the ethics, still in Indonesia, an IRB authorization process is not used, we covered the identities of people, places, and the research site through the use of made-up names to keep
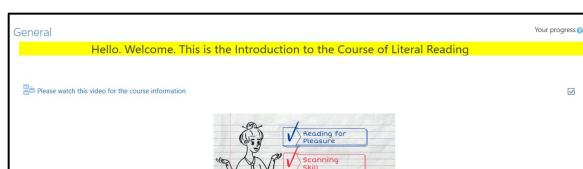
the rights of human participants. We also persuaded our participants that their contribution was totally volunteer and their stories would be privately treated.

Findings

The implementation of blended learning in literal reading course

Blended learning was implemented in Literal Reading Course in the first semester. This course was offered to the first semester students majoring in English Education Study Program in one public university in South Sumatera with three credit hours. Blended learning was done by combining traditional in-class delivery and e-learning. Following the policy of the university, e-learning had to be implemented as many as 4 meetings as an addition to or substitution to the face-to-face interaction in the classroom. In Literal Reading Course, out of the total 16 meetings the students had with their lecturers, 4 meetings were conducted out of the classroom by using e-learning excluding the mid semester and final examination. Related to the e-learning, the lecturer created an online class by using the e-learning site facilitated by the university. The other 12 meetings were conducted through face-to-face interactions in the classroom including the mid semester and final examination.

Implementation of e-learning. The e-learning was conducted in the 10th, 11th, 12th, and 13th meetings. The e-learning was not conducted in the beginning of the course as students needed to get familiar first with the course in order to be able to learn independently through individual or group interactions through online learning. At first, students were given the manual to be the members of the class with the online class code. Students had to make their account and joined the class by themselves using the class code. Once students opened the online class, they were given lists of topics with various activities. Students were also welcomed with a video about the Literal Reading course at glance. The video consisted of the course description, learning objectives, and learning materials. The video was created by the teacher of the course.
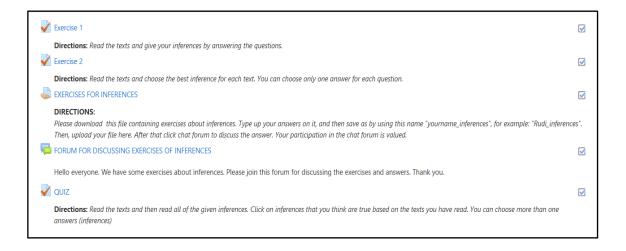
Figure 1. *Video in the e-learning of literal reading course*

In this e-learning, students' attendance was recorded digitally so that the teacher did not need to check them one by one manually as in the classroom. Regarding the learning activities, students experienced various reading activities for each meeting. In some parts, students were provided with some instructional videos containing explanations of the materials. In other activity, students were asked to download materials from the online course and submit their work to this e-learning site. They also had a forum where the students discussed the materials or answers of exercises or quizzes with other students and teachers. Besides, they had some reading exercises in which they read a number of passages and answered some reading comprehension exercises and quizzes. These exercises and quizzes also varied in forms such as multiple choice, true-false, short answer, and essay.

Figure 2. *Various activities in the e-learning of literal reading course*

In some exercises or quizzes, students were given certain duration to complete them. The duration was set by the teachers, so that students doing their tasks were not able to submit their works when the time was expired. After doing certain tasks such as multiple choices, true false or short answer questions, students were able to see their scores automatically displayed on the computer screen. While for other activities like students' participation in the forum or uploaded assignments needed thorough detail assessment from teacher, so that the score could not be displayed directly for the students.

Implementation of in-class delivery. In this type of teaching and learning process, in-class delivery, the students and teacher carried out the course in a classroom. They have face-to-face interaction without the intervention of the ICT. Teacher taught the students through 3 stages, namely pre, whilst, and post activities. In this teaching and learning mode, students were given some explanations through lecturing and discussions.

For the materials, the teachers and students used only one textbook for the reading course. Students were taught the reading skills such as previewing and predicting, skimming,

scanning, and guessing meanings of words from context, identifying main idea, and other skills. Students were given abundant texts and they had to apply their reading skills in completing the tasks. They were also given certain durations to complete the activities, but in this face-to-face interaction, students often asked for more time to the teacher so that the duration for doing the tasks was extended. Students did their tasks by using paper and pen, which were not used at all in e-learning activities. Then, the teachers and students had some discussions related to the reading texts and tasks.

Students' perceptions on the blended learning in literal reading course

To explain in detail EFL students' perceptions on the blended learning they had in Literal Reading course, their responses in the interview were coded and built into themes and sub-themes. The result is diplayed in tabel 1.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Advantages of e-learning	Flexible learning
	Challenging learning
	Understandable materials
	Ease of use
	Variations in learning
Challenges in e-learning	Poor internet connection
	Limited time in reading exercises/quizzes
	Exact wordings for short answer test

Advantages of e-learning. Based on students responses in the semi-structured interview, it showed that they had the same main points about e-learning which can be described in one theme, namely advantages of e-learning. These advantages of e-learning were divided into sub-themes namely flexible learning, challenging learning, understandable materials, ease of use, and variations in learning. Firstly, most of the students said that e-learning offered flexibility for them. They could access the e-learning wherever and whenever they wanted to. The learning could be done as long as they had internet connection and smartphone or laptop. Students' statements on flexibility were as follows:

"It (the e-learning) made the learning and instruction easy. As a college student, I really enjoyed it as I could do it wherever I was." (Student 1)
"The strength of e-learning was that we could do everything at home with only laptop or smartphone. We did not have to go to the campus." (Student 2)
"The e-learning could be used at any places as long as internet connection was available. Students could concentrate on the learning optimally." (Student 3)

Next, students felt that the learning became challenging through e-learning. They felt that it was a new experience for them and they were challenged especially when they had to complete some timed reading exercises and quizzes.

> "It was good enough and made me feel challenged as I had to read fast when doing the quiz with duration." (Student 4)

Besides, students also reported that the materials presented in the e-learning were easy to understand. They also reported that the materials helped them develop their reading skill.

> "The given materials, in my opinian, were easy to understand so that I could follow the materials step by step." (Student 5)

> "I would say that the materials/content delivery in e-learning of literal reading course used good language and word choice, so students could get the meanings of the materials. Besides, there were contents delivery through video with some examples created by the teacher" (Student 6)

In addition to understandable materials, a number of students reported that the features in the e-learning were easy to use though some students said that at first it was a little difficult as using e-learning was a new experience, but they eventually managed to use the e-learning very well.

> "For me, the e-learning was easy to use as it had simple features and well-ordered presentation so that it was not confusing at all." (Student 7)

> " In the beginning of using the e-learning, I felt it was difficult as it was my first time using e-learning, and I was not accostumed to the fast duration (of reading), but as time goes by I got used to it." (Student 8)

Some students, finally, had the same perception that the e-learning offered variations in their learning experience. They felt that it would be boring if they had the same activities throughout the course.

> "... because some of the students perhaps felt bored when they were presented with the same media or delivery technique over and over." (Student 9)

> " ... as with the combination of face-to-face interaction and e-learning, we can get knowledge through more various learning systems." (Student 10)

Based on what they had experienced during blended learning, especially in the e-learning mode, students found the e-learning as a useful alternative to the face-to-face learning in the classrrom as they could use it easily with learning flexibility (not limited to time and space), a wide range of learning variations with understandable materials, and challenging activities.

> ***Challenges in e-learning.*** In addition to the benefits of the use of e-learning that students had reported, students also mentioned that they had some challenges to deal with when they were using e-learning. Poor internet connection, limited time in completing quizzes/exercises, and providing exact wording in short answer test were some shortcomings they encountered. Most of the students were in agreement that it was hard for them, sometimes, to use e-learning as their internet connection was not good enough or even not available. They reported that their learning activities in e-learning was sometimes hindered by the poor internet connection. To make it worse, it made them miss the online learning activities as they were diconnected.

"One of the weaknesses was internet connection. When it was not good, our activity was disrupted and even we missed it." (Student 11)

"I think there was not (any weaknesses of e-learning), but it took so long to open the e-learning due to poor internet connection." (Student 12)

Another challenge they felt was they were in a rush in completing the timed reading comprehension exercises and quizzes. During the e-learning, there were some reading exercises or quizzes that they had to complete under certain duration such as when they were learning the reading skill like skimming or scanning that they had to read faster.

"The weakness (of the e-learning) was that I had to complete the tasks given by the lecturer in a rush. I, whose reading level was very basic with limited vocabulary had to read faster and found the time given to complete the tasks was too short." (Student 13)

The last point that some students highlighted was the weakness of the e-learning system in short-answer question. They reported their answers had to be in exact same words as the answer key recorded in the system. Eventhough they had the same main points in their answers yet with different words, their answers were considered wrong by the system.

" The failure of the e-learning, in my point of you, was when our short answers had to be exactly the same as the shorts answers programmed in the computer. If the answers were not an exact match, they were considered wrong by the system. At that time, I used different words but with the same meaning. " (Student 14)

From the statements above, students, in fact, experienced some difficulties when they had to do the e-learning. The poor internet connection became the major problem encountered by the students. Students sometimes missed the e-learning as their internet connection was not good. Some of them also report that they encountered a dfficulty in reading activities, especially when they had to complete the timed reading comprehension test as they had to answer all of the questions before the time set by the system was over. The last obstacle they had was about the short answer system that required them to write exact words as recorded in the system. If the students used different words which its meaning as actualy the same as the answer key in the system, the answers were considered wrong. This resulted in students' low scores of reading comprehension test in the form of showrt-answer questions.

Discussion

In the light of the result above, it is known that most of the reading classes were conducted in the classroom and the e-learning was implemented four times as it was in accordance with the policy of the university regarding blended learning implementation that the maximum number of meetings for e-learning was four times. Tawil (2018) emphasizes that the face-to-face instruction to complement the e-learning classes is prominent in language teaching. The integration of these modes can increase the efficiency through blended learning, which eventually will result in improvement in language teaching. In this study, the e-learning could serve as either additional classes or substitutional classes to the in-class instruction. This is in line with what Hadiyanto (2019) summarized in his study that e-

learning can serve as additional learning, complement, and substitution which the latter one is used in the e-learning implementation of the reading course in this current research. This study also revealed students' perceptions on the use of e-learning in the blended learning reading course. Students reported some benefits and challenges of the incorporation of e-learning in their reading course. They pointed out some benefits of e-learning such as flexible learning, challenging learning, understandable materials, ease of use, and variations in learning. In terms of flexibility as one of the benefits of e-learning, this is also supported by the result of a study in which all of the participants pointed out that the fundamental reasons for implementing online instruction were flexibility and self–control within the learning environment (Armstrong, 2012). Furthermore, in a study conducted by Radial (2019) points out that blended learning relies much on the integration of multiple methods which results in improved pedagogy that could meet wide varieties of students' needs for its easiness in terms of learning access and its flexibility. Furthermore, Oliver and Trigwell (2005) mention that in the variation theory of learning, learning takes place if learners experience variation as variation facilitates discernment and discernment triggers learning. This made possible with the use of e-learning.

Students also mentioned some challenges of e-learning such as poor internet connection. In relation to this problem, Oweis (2018) argue that in e-learning has some technical problems like poor internet connection along with its high mintenance cost. Furthermore, Omer, Klomsri, Tedre, Popova, Allvin, and Osman (2015) reported in their study that the students emphasized the crucial role of good internet connection. They mentioned that poor internet connectivity made students miss the online classes or assignment submission deadlines. It also led to disruption of ommunication between students and teachers.

Another problem that students encountered in the e-learning was limited time in completing quizzes/exercises. In the reading comprehension tests, the teacher set the duration for students to complete the task so that students had to use their reading skill especially skimming and scanning. In practising the skimming and scanning skill, students had to read the reading passages fast. To make sure that they read fast in order to apply the reading skills, the reading comprehension tests were set with duration. That is why students had limited time to complete the tests.In this case, the e-learning system was beneficial and helped teachers to make students train their reading skills. In the students' point of view, however, they were overwhelmed with the timed reading comprehension test.

The last problem the students report was that in short answer test, students had to answer by using the words which had to be exactly the same as the answer keys recorded in the system of e-learning. Concerning this issue related to the system of the e-learning, Kintu, Zhu, and Kagambe (2017) mention that system quality contributes to problems in blended learning so that the content delivery mode or the e-learning platform should meet certain threshold for teachers as an attempt to obtain the maximum perfomance of the blended learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study yielded several findings. First, the implementation of the blended learning was divided into 12 meetings of in-class delivery and 4 meetings of online learning. In the classroom, students learned by using reading course textbooks with lecturing and discussion activities without any ICT uses. In other four meetings through online classes, students used various materials such as reading passages from their book and internet, and materials in videos. They also had chat forum, and timed reading exercises, and quizzes. Students' perceptions on the implementation of e-learning were categorized into advantages and challenges of e-learning. They found that the e-learning offered some benefits like flexible learning, challenging learning, understandable materials, ease of use, and some variations in learning. The students, however, encountered some problems such as poor internet connection, limited time in reading comprehension exercises and quizzes, and the use of exact wordings for short answer test. This study provide some implications for future researchers, teachers and course designers.

Regardless these findings, this present study has some limitations. First, the results are not representative of the teachers and students at the university as this is a small-scale study. Despite these limitations, this study can contribute to the literature about the utilization of blended learning for reading course. It can also give practical contribution for the teachers and designers to design blended learning specifically for reading courses by considering the findings of this present study. Additionally, further research can investigate the implementation of blended learning in other English language skills or aspects, in large-scale research. It is also recommended to investigate deeper perceptions viewed from the teachers.

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