Reimagining Blended Learning Post-COVID-19: Insights from EFL Students' Narratives

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Abstract

Background: During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, many academics and researchers in English Language Teaching (ELT) have studied a variety of issues faced in various types of online teaching and learning, including examining the efficacy of the Blended Learning (BL) approach as a result of the emergency remote and fully online learning or e-learning in response to the learning-from-home policy. Nevertheless, the researchers discovered that only a few studies employed a narrative inquiry method to explore students' perspectives, stories, and voices relating to their ways of learning during and after the pandemic.

Objective: This study helped the researchers better understand the challenges students faced and the adjustments they made, providing unique insights that other methods might miss.

Methods: This study addresses that gap by examining the stories and views of nine EFL students from three Indonesian universities who experienced various learning modes during and after the pandemic, including face-to-face, fully online, and blended classes. The students were requested to share their experiences and viewpoints about the BL approach through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The methods and tools from the narrative analysis were then employed to analyze the gathered stories and responses.

Findings: The findings indicate that while most students supported BL using appropriate online tools, their understanding of the approach varied, emphasizing the need for specific conditions for its successful implementation.

Conclusion: This study contributes to the understanding of the approach variations of BL.

Keywords: Blended Learning; EFL Students; Narratives; Post-COVID-19

Introduction

COVID-19 used to be one of the world's most tragic moments in history (2019-2021) and has seriously impacted many different sectors such as the economy, politics, and education. During the pandemic, governments in many countries had to set out new regulations for the purpose of anticipating and preventing the virus outbreak and infection. All the countries around the globe were even instructed to ensure that their citizens stay at home and restrict their activities and movements (World Health Organization, 2020). Particularly in Indonesia, many public facilities and places including schools and campuses were forced to undergo complete closures conforming to the new regulations (Djalante, et.al., 2020). Due to the mandatory of staying at home, the activities of learning and teaching in most schools and higher education institutions could not be carried out in the normal way, and these, therefore, required some adaptations to online distance learning with the internet, which then became a new learning habit (Moorhouse, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Murphy, 2020).

During the pandemic, all the educational institutions from primary to the tertiary level in Indonesia were obliged to follow the Learning from Home (LfH) policy by conducting their learning activities online using different types of platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Office (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia [MoECRI], 2020]. This particular mode of teaching comes across as having persisted up to the present time in most parts of the world, and many of them including Indonesia have been implementing a hybrid learning approach that allows the combination of face-to-face meetings and online classes using various technological tools (Febrianto & Susanto, 2023; Amri, et al., 2019; Hall & Davison, 2007; Zen, 2019). The circumstances during the pandemic inevitably made students and teachers around the world experience an unexpected shift of learning from the conventional way of learning to online learning mode, which then required certain adjustments to ensure the effectiveness of the given lessons (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). However, such adjustments also need struggles affecting students' personal emotions such as their mental health and motivation in learning (Macintyre, et al., 2020). This distinct situation eventually led to a significant shift in how people think and do in life including their beliefs and attitudes toward education (Moorhouse, 2020; Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, technology had actually been utilized for the realization of ICT-integrated classes known as Blended Learning (BL), but everything seemed to significantly change when it came to realizing the LfH policy, particularly in how the ICT tools were employed and the proportion of their use in practice. According to Bonk and Graham (2006), BL is a learning system that "combines face-to-face interaction with computer-mediated instruction," which is actually similar to Hybrid Learning (p.5). BL has long been researched and evidenced as an effective method that helps facilitate students' positive development, such as increasing their motivation, stimulating their autonomous learning, cultivating positive behavior, and enhancing their academic performance (Siemens, et al., 2015; Wang & Zhang, 2022) and so on. Many studies also show how learners have relatively strong positive perceptions and attitudes toward the BL applications in class (Gao, et al., 2020; Istifci, 2017; Wang, et al., 2019; Wright, 2017; Wu & Liu, 2013). However, what students and teachers did in education during the pandemic time did not seem to practically represent the principles of BL, but it was actually fully online learning, or e-learning to be exact. E-learning heavily relies on the utilization of computers, smartphones, and other internet-connected devices to offer the flexibility of remote students' participation from different places, regardless of their distances, whereas BL necessitates either the physical presence or activities of both students and teachers in a classroom setting (Banditvilai, 2016). Interestingly, in the post-pandemic time, many studies have shown that students including EFL learners prefer the BL approach to E-learning for their most effective learning (Febrianto & Susanto, 2023).

From the literature and empirical studies on the BL approach discussed above, it can be implied that BL has been considered to be the most relevant teaching approach, particularly in EFL classes today and in the future. Nevertheless, the way students learn and how they perceive the BL approach at present might be different from what it used to be as a result of the massive activities of online learning they experienced during the pandemic and the latest technological advancements that support them. As students must adapt to the new type of learning environment, the current implementation of the BL approach should be reviewed and redesigned to align with their current learning needs. Further research has been held to examine the efficacy of the approach in the post-pandemic era, especially when implemented in different types of learning activities and contexts. Some of the studies suggest ideal characteristics and

qualities of BL in the disruptive era. For instance, Huang, et al. (2022), in their investigation, found out that whether BL can be successful or not is significantly determined by teachers' roles and the meaningful tasks they design as they impact their students' motivation and engagement in class. And this such engagement influences their learning performance, skills, attitudes, achievement, creativity, global literacy, and continuous learning intention (Argyriou, et al., 2022; Jiang & Liang, 2023; Tong, et al., 2022; Yang & Kuo., 2021). These findings are among the similar results discovered by many other recently related studies.

Most studies above and other related research used a quantitative approach, which seems to overlook the nuanced realities of learning that students experience. More investigations are therefore needed to get a more in-depth understanding of how the BL approach can be effectively implemented at present and in the future, particularly from the students' perspectives and standpoints. Narrative Inquiry (NI) was used to address this gap by capturing students' lived experiences, offering deeper insights into their challenges, emotions, and adaptations (Clandinin & Conelly, 2000). This is also in line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes learning as a socially constructed process (Vygotsky, 1978). For this rationale, this study employs the NI approach to examine students' reflections on the BL implementations and to reveal more effective, student-centered BL practices. It is also expected that through this research, a new type of BL approach can be developed to ensure flexibility and engagement in the current EFL education. In this sense, a new student-centered BL framework must integrate interactive technological tools, project-based learning, and a well-balanced mix of online and face-to-face activities. To reach these goals, this study attempts to answer the following research questions: (1) What challenges and issues do EFL students face in the BL classes they take in the post-pandemic era? (2) How do EFL students perceive the ideal implementation of the BL approach in their future classes?

Literature Review

Blended Learning

Many scholars have different opinions about the definition and framework of Blended Learning (BL), although they generally share a common fundamental meaning and purpose. For example, Gayatri, et al. (2022) have recently identified a broad range of definitions and concepts

of the approach in different regions and countries due to some contextual and cultural factors. Among all the scholars who discuss the approach, the definition by Bonk and Graham (2012) is apparently often mentioned in lots of scientific works: BL is generally defined as a teaching approach that combines both traditional face-to-face meetings and online classes. However, Graham, et.al (2003) argue that this combination is not merely about the integration of physical learning activities with technology and the internet, but it includes three different areas of instruction such as instructional multimodalities, instructional methods, and online and offline interactions. For some scholars, BL is not similar to "hybrid or mixed learning" (Stracke, 2007, p. 57; Tomlinson & Whittaker, 2013) although both have the same basic idea in terms of combining the different modes of learning and teaching. In addition, scholars have different perceptions relating to the propositional composition of the combination: some suggest that the lesson should contain between 30% and 79% of activities held online (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Graham, 2006), while others argue that it can vary according to the contexts in which the lesson takes place and the purpose of learning activities in class (Graham & Robinson, 2007; Gayatri, et al., 2022; Moskal, et al., 2013; Staker & Horn, 2012).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, many researchers in different parts of the world including EFL countries have the same idea about the positive sides and impacts of the BL implementation in class, and lots of recent studies also support this notion. Overall, several benefits that can be obtained from the BL application include flexibility and promoting independent and autonomous learning for students (Busaya & Saovapa, 2018) as well as focusing on their outcomes in regard to improving language skills (Siew-Eng & Muuk, 2015). The BL approach has been assumed to decrease and limit students' interactions, but some studies somehow show the other way around as its use of technology enables teachers to facilitate more fruitful discussions, leading to students' satisfaction (Missildine et al., 2013; Pregoner & Baguio, 2024). In fact, with the integration of ICT, interactions among students do not only occur in classrooms but outside classrooms as well (McLaughlin et al., 2013). The use of ICT in BL can also make a lesson more attractive than a conventional class does (Zainuddin, 2017). In addition to that, the approach has recently been evidenced to improve students' accountability and creativity in their learning process (Fazlali, 2024).

While the BL approach offers many advantages, several studies also examine the efficacy of the approach, some of which discover that the success of BL actually depends on certain factors such as the area of learning that needs to be developed and other conditions that affect its realizations. Having reviewed a range of literature and empirical studies on the BL approach, Gayatri, et al. (2022), conclude that the approach can be considered to be the most suitable approach in ELT today, but when it is examined more deeply in context, it only gains success on the surface as there are some particular conditions including socio-cultural aspects around both learners and teachers that have not been seriously taken into account. Other studies also reveal some issues and challenges faced in the BL applications such as the lack of support from the policymakers and faculty, which then results in the unavailability of adequate infrastructure and teacher training (Tshabalala, et al., 2014). Another problem has to do with the teachers' misinterpretation of the definition, principles, and practices of the approach (Mirriahi, et al., 2015), which leads to unclear goals and objectives of the BL approach in class (Smith & Hills, 2018).

In Indonesia, much current research has been carried out to measure and investigate the efficacy and feasibility of the BL approach particularly during the post-COVID-19 pandemic, and the results appear to be surprising. Despite the benefits and satisfaction offered by the approach, challenges arise due to teachers' lack of knowledge and understanding of the concept, along with technical issues such as inadequate ICT facilities and unstable internet connection (Muslem, et al., 2018; Rianto, 2020; Sari, et al., 2019; Setyaningsih, 2020; Zen, 2019). In line with other studies, Gayatri et al. (2022) also reveal that many EFL teachers in Indonesian HE institutions are not familiar with the BL approach and even have different interpretations of it, and this condition surely impacts the way they give instructions in class. Furthermore, students in the country also lack an understanding of the approach (Faatihah, et al., 2024; Rianto, 2020; Wuryaningsih et al., 2019; Zainuddin & Keumala, 2018). To address all these issues, BL, therefore, requires lots of preparation and adequate training. Zainuddin and Keumala (2018) suggest that to create an effective blended lesson, teachers must invest plenty of time in learning and developing materials from various digital resources and integrate them into their learning management system (LMS). As technology continues to evolve, particularly with the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education, it is also essential that teachers take the most out of

various AI platforms to enhance their lesson engagement and effectiveness (Park & Doo, 2024). Integrating AI tools alongside traditional digital resources can provide more dynamic, personalized, and interactive learning experiences, allowing teachers to ensure that their blended lessons remain relevant and impactful.

The Framework of Effective ELT Today

From a sociocultural perspective, effective learning occurs through social interactions, and an individual's competence can greatly improve when engaged in learning activities that are facilitated by others who possess higher knowledge and expertise (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, children cannot acquire knowledge independently due to their limited capacity. By engaging in social interactions with more capable individuals, they can experience greater development compared to independent study. This learning concept is known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which has gained significant popularity among scholars and educators and serves as a fundamental principle in education, particularly in the context of second-language teaching. Brown (2007, p. 24) defines ZPD as the gap in the learners' development level or "the distance between learners' existing developmental state and their potential development." This implies that social interactions are the key elements in the learning process, as the ZPD expands through them, and such interactions need to be organized in a systematic scaffolding. This aligns with Gibbons' (2002) notion on how scaffolding needs to be designed purposefully to address students' learning needs. Several studies have revealed that when students engage in systematic scaffolded interactions through discussions and peer-assisted learning, their cognitive development and second language (L2) acquisition are significantly enhanced (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Mercer & Howe, 2012; Storch, 2002; Febrianto, 2019). Other most recent research also supports these studies in terms of how structured social interactions, collaborations, and cultural contexts, even in technological and virtual settings, substantially contribute to the development of students' cognitive and L2 acquisition (Alkhudiry, 2022; Dewi & Oktapiani, 2024; Kilag, et al., 2023).

Today, due to the development of ICT and the internet, scaffolding can be arranged and carried out in different ways. Teachers can now use various types of digital platforms to facilitate the execution of the scaffolding they have designed. In addition to that, the global impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic has forced people worldwide to be familiar with the practice of online learning, which certainly requires customized scaffolding, and teachers need to get used to it. The pandemic has made online education more common, allowing teachers to flexibly apply a broad range of teaching approaches including the BL approach and e-learning. For such a learning shift, both students and teachers must have faced unexpected challenges and issues as it required lots of adjustments, not to mention the problems found in the implementation of BL for certain conditions (Febrianto & Susanto, 2023; Deniz, 2024). Therefore, it is obvious that teachers have to adapt and modify their teaching strategies, including their scaffolded lessons, by redesigning them to align with the latest available technology of learning, so that they can be relevant to the students' learning needs.

Regarding online language learning and teaching, the theory of transactional distance, proposed by Moore (in Moore & Diehl, 2018) can be relevant to the ongoing discussions. Building upon Vygotsky's ZPD theory (1978), Moore (1993) has developed a substantial learning framework that can be useful and impactful for the current and potential future implementation of online and BL learning. In his earlier research, he categorizes three different forms of interactions that contribute to the effectiveness of distance learning: learner to learner, learner to instructor, and learner to content. Teachers need to be aware of these interaction types when designing online lessons with appropriate scaffoldings to promote student engagement in virtual classrooms. This means that effective learning activities can be constructed and organized in scaffoldings in online settings, and when seriously planned, these lessons can also stimulate students' independent and autonomous learning as one of the fundamental goals of education (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2022).

Method

This study employed the Narrative Inquiry (NI) method to explore the students' lived experiences with Blended Learning in the post-pandemic era. This method has gained popularity in qualitative research in many different areas including education (Mertova & Webster, 2020). This is also one of the appropriate methods used to comprehend how individuals construct meanings from their experiences as "stories to live by" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). Data

were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their detailed reflections and enabling researchers to get comprehensive and in-depth information for further exploration, theme development, and meaningful analysis (Barkhuizen et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2011, Mertova & Webster, 2020). In this sense, interviews were conducted to seek further clarification on any gaps or missing aspects found in the responses provided in the questionnaires.

To ensure reliability, participants were asked to review interpretations of their narratives for accuracy and authentic interpretations. This helped triangulate findings by validating coherence between interviews and questionnaires. In addition, the Framework of Reduction in Loss (PRL) was used to evaluate the collected data from both questionnaires and interviews (Rust & Cooil, 1994). Interviews were carried out online in English using the Zoom application considering the participants' different locations. Video recordings of online interviews were used to capture non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, providing deeper insights into participants' emotions and engagement levels. The interview process was conducted in two rounds, ensuring a deeper exploration of students' experiences. The first round focused on general perceptions and initial reactions to BL, while the second round allowed participants to reflect further, clarify responses, and provide additional insights based on their experiences. This approach ensured that the data captured their lived experiences comprehensively and authentically.

Participants

A total of nine undergraduate EFL students from three Indonesian universities took part in the study: three from a state university in the capital city of Jakarta and six from private universities located in two different regions, which are geographically distant from Jakarta. With a relatively limited number of participants, this qualitative research aims to ensure the collection of detailed and comprehensive data by using an open-ended questionnaire extended by in-depth two-round interviews and utilizing member checks to verify and enrich the participants' narratives (Cohen et al., 2011; Dörnyei, 2007). In terms of the current BL practices that participants experienced, they generally shared various ways in which BL was implemented in their institutions, from synchronous online lectures combined with periodic face-to-face sessions to asynchronous

learning through LMS platforms with limited in-person engagement. These variations provide a broad perspective on BL effectiveness and areas for improvement.

Table 1. Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Home Address	Length of Study at University	English Proficiency (CEFR)
Peni	Jakarta	Year 4	B2
Sahnaz	Jakarta	Year 4	B1
Rani	Jakarta	Year 4	B1
Mirna	Semarang, Central Java	Year 3	B1
Wida	Semarang, Central Java	Year 3	B2
Andhika	Kediri, East Java	Year 2	B1
Rengga	Kediri, East Java	Year 2	B1
Itho	Kediri, East Java	Year 2	B1
Amrih	Kediri, East Java	Year 2	B2

Data Analysis

In the process of analyzing the narrative data taken from both questionnaires and interviews, the researchers employed the principles and procedures outlined by Riessman (2008) and the analyzing stages in the research of language teaching and learning proposed by Barkhuizen, et al. (2013). The questionnaire data were analyzed using thematic content analysis in which responses were coded and categorized into emerging themes that aligned with the study's objectives and research questions. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns, challenges, and perspectives related to BL implementation. Concerning the data from the interviews, the researchers identified and categorized the prominent emerging themes that were not restricted to the predefined questions or hypotheses but rather derived directly from the stories narrated by the participants. The stories or narratives themselves serve as the primary sources of research findings and are utilized to address the research questions at hand (Benson, 2013). This approach ensured that the findings from the interviews complemented those from the questionnaires, providing a more holistic understanding of students' experiences.

The categorized themes were then analyzed by taking into consideration the story contents and other relevant factors such as the context in which the stories were shared and the reasons behind their sharing. Barkhuizen (in Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015) states that the narrative data needs to be interpreted by considering "a more detailed thematic by coding for themes and

triangulating across data sources" (p. 176). As Riessman (2008) points out, in narrative analysis, it is essential to go beyond a mere focus on the content (thematic/content analysis) by considering other narrative elements: the manner of conveying (structural analysis), the surrounding context (dialogic/performative analysis), and any visual elements during storytelling (visual analysis). These analytical approaches enabled the researchers to apply multi-layered analysis, capturing not only what was said but also how and why the stories were shared. This process reinforced the validity of the findings through a holistic examination of the participants' narratives.

Findings

Referring to the research questions, the findings are presented concerning two different areas: 1) Issues encountered by EFL students during the implementation of BL classes in the post-pandemic time, and 2)The ideal implementation of Blended Learning (BL) in future classes perceived by EFL students. The general themes of the findings for each of the areas are displayed in the table 2 and table 3.

Table 2. Issues in BL Classes

No	Issues encountered by EFL students during the implementation of BL classes in the post-pandemic time
1	Difficulty in understanding detailed materials in class
2	Distractions hindering students' learning focus
3	Fear of having heavy workloads after experiencing classes during COVID-19
4	Lack of meaningful interactions and physical relationship
5	Inadequate infrastructure for Internet access and lack of knowledge of using ICT in learning

Table 3. The Ideal BL Classes

No	The ideal implementation of BL in future classes perceived by EFL students
1	Classes have sufficient infrastructure
2	Classes have engaging lessons, and
3	Classes have lecturers with some important qualities

From the participants' narratives, there are five main issues identified (Table 2) and three characteristics of the ideal BL classes proposed (Table 3). Detailed descriptions of each of the emerging themes are presented along with commentaries on them.

Challenges in BL: Balancing Technology Integration and Meaningful Classroom Interactions

Most participants agree that all learning activities need to be integrated with technology for their attractiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency. Nevertheless, they emphasized the need for well-prepared classes with a balanced mix of virtual and physical activities. They highlighted benefits such as learning flexibility, access to rich materials, and recorded sessions, while also noting that ICT tools make lessons more interactive and easier to understand than conventional classes.

> In online learning, I can access many interesting materials from different websites and social media such as accounts for learning English, which is really interesting and helpful for me. Online classes makes me a person who can study a lot of things. (Amrih; questionnaire)

> The virtual classes can be recorded then we can play whenever we need when we find some difficulties of doing the task. I enjoy using them because, before joining the class, I can read the materials first, because the teacher already posted all the materials before. (Rengga; interview)

Amrih and Rengga appeared to have strong positive attitudes towards online learning they had experienced so far, and others also had similar responses when asked about the same thing. However, they emphasized the need for a balanced blend of online and physical classes. While they had experienced ICT-integrated learning before the pandemic, their e-learning experience during COVID-19 shaped their views on effective classes at present. In their narratives, they firmly stated that classes should not be full of online sessions for numerous issues faced as shown in the participants' responses when talking about their learning experience during the time of the COVID-19 outbreak. From the interviews, distractions are one of the most serious concerns in regard to online learning. Since such learning can take place anywhere, many inevitable distractions around the participants can potentially divert their focus from their studies. This

can be seen in Amrih's story when she tried to reflect on her online learning experience during the pandemic time.

> *There were a lot of distractions around my learning activities. Because I learned at home, there's so many disturbance. My family, my mom is cooking and dad is working, my sister also did her own businesses at home. My neighbours also usually came and made noises. Sometimes, they asked me for a help. Oh my God. But when I am in campus, everyone is doing the same thing as me. So I can focus on my study. (Amrih; interview)*

In the interview, Amrih was likely to convey a sense of frustration regarding her experience with e-learning during the pandemic time, as reflected in her manner of expressing her thoughts and feelings, characterized by her raising intonation and emphasis. She felt e-learning failed to meet her needs effectively, as she had to contend with numerous distractions and a heavy workload while attempting to focus on her studies. Participants also noted the lack of meaningful interactions, with Andhika highlighting the absence of direct feedback and guidance, which he found essential for improving his English learning.

> *For me, interactions with others play a very important role in improving my English. In online meetings, actually, I was able to speak, but I had no idea how to construct my words. I believe that in offline learning, we have the advantage of being able to directly ask our lecturers or friends when we don't understand the material. With the help of lecturers and fellow classmates, I can identify and correct my mistakes (Andhika, questionnaire).*

Based on the stories shared, it can be inferred that for the participants, the presence of lecturers and students as well as the interactions that occur in physical classrooms are highly influential in facilitating the students' learning processes. These interactions need to be considered seriously so that students can learn to socialize and receive direct feedback from their lecturers and classmates. Therefore, the combination of online lessons and physical activities in BL classes has to be seriously planned and should be based on what types of goals and purposes students are to achieve.

Inadequate Internet Connectivity and Lecturers' Inefficiency in ICT Integration

In both questionnaires and interviews, all participants identified problems in online learning and emphasized the need to address them in this study, hoping to find possible solutions. An unstable internet connection was the first issue that came up, particularly from those living outside big cities like Jakarta and Semarang.

> *In my experience, when we had online classes, my biggest problem was internet connection. I had to find a place to find the connection. But it's hard. Then it's difficult for me to manage my assignments, because the lecturer post them on Google Classroom.* (Itho, interview)

Some of the participants also experienced such a situation although many of them live in big cities. For example, Peni, in spite of becoming a student at a prestigious university in Jakarta, complained about her difficulty in getting a signal and had to find a WiFi area to join online classes.

> *Personally, my problem is always slow internet connection, so I usually go to a place like internet cafe or my friend's house to get internet. But I have to spend money for this too. (Peni, interview)*

Another important concern the participants raised was the insufficient knowledge and understanding of their lecturers in utilizing tools used in class effectively. This indicates the lecturers' lack of training in conducting classes with the support of ICT. Andhika was among the participants who strongly addressed this issue. Reflecting on his learning experience during the pandemic, he noticed that most lessons were poorly prepared, with excessive tasks and little guidance. Furthermore, the online activities and lessons seemed to be conducted the same way as those in conventional classes or without any necessary adjustments, making it hard for students to grasp the material.

> *Lectures only shared materials and instructed us to do assignments. But they did not give us clear instructions and guidance in how to do the assignments. I did not enjoy the class. I think my friends did not enjoy it, too. (Andhika, interview)*

Reflecting on Andhika's story, it can be concluded that the lecturers' unfamiliarity and lack of knowledge about the use of online tools resulted in the lessons that were full of

assignments and tasks since the lecturers tended to use traditional teaching methods. The lack of effective strategies by the lecturers in handling online learning finally made students feel overwhelmed and bored, and ultimately experienced discomfort in the online learning environment.

The Perceived Characteristics of Effective Classes

Participants, having experienced various learning methods before, during, and after the pandemic, shared insights about effective classes relevant today and in the future. They agreed that future English classes should adopt a BL approach, combining online and offline methods to cater to students' needs and address challenges from e-learning. However, participants also shared several required conditions for what type of BL classes they were expecting despite their diverse perceptions and understanding of the approach. For them, the classes should have three key elements as follows:

Sufficient Infrastructure

As previously discussed, one of the primary issues in online learning is the inadequacy of infrastructure, particularly the internet facilities, and for the participants, it should be immediately resolved for its urgency and priority. Amrih and Adhika, for instance, representing other participants' voices, pointed out a challenge faced by other students in regard to the availability of ICT equipment and stable internet connection when they were asked about the implementation of BL in class, although it does not seem to be the case for them.

> *Sometimes, my friends who are from remote areas lack of internet connection, so that it's difficult for them to access online materials. It's all about their readiness and accommodation or infrastructure. (Amrih, interview)*

> *To be able to access online learning smoothly, you must use a more stable internet connection, of course you must have a cellphone / laptop to support learning which of course not all student have. (Andhika, questionnaire)*

These narratives suggest that effective BL classes require well-equipped ICT facilities and proper internet management, as they significantly influence teachers' decisions and creative class activities. Obviously, creativities need logistic support.

Engaging Lessons

According to the participants, another crucial element that needs to be considered when applying the BL approach is having classes that facilitate and stimulate students' engagement. Andhika is one of the participants who explicitly stated that lecturers need to take into account the purposes of designing BL classes as he believed that to achieve their students' learning goals, the BL approach should be realized with intention and careful decision.

> *When using blended learning, keep in mind that its aim is to combine the strengths of both traditional and online learning methods in order to give your learners a more engaging learning experience. (Andhika, questionnaire)*

Similar to Andhika, Mirna also talks about the conditions that support the effectiveness of BL classes although she is not confident about her understanding of the approach.

> *Actually, I don't know a lot about Blended Learning. But I really learned from my experience before the pandemic and after the pandemic. So I think blended learning will be effective as well if everything is prepared really well...everything should be prepared and organized well so that students can enjoy the class. With careful planning, I think blended learning is able to achieve the intended learning goals. (Mirna, interview)*

Mirna believed that it is important for lecturers to ensure that their students enjoy the given classes so that the goals of learning can be smoothly achieved. And this can be realized when the BL lessons they handle are carefully planned and organized according to the learning needs of their students.

Certain Qualities of Lecturers

In addressing how lessons should be engaging and enjoyable as discussed earlier, the participants expressed their views on the ideal types of lecturers that can handle BL classes

effectively for the present and future, and their responses were remarkably similar. According to them, a lecturer who is considered ideal should possess certain essential qualities that enable them to work professionally, understand their roles, and effectively support their students' learning growth. Interestingly, most qualities mentioned have to do with mental and emotional aspects, which are very personal and likely to be undermined in the education field. First of all, English lecturers need to be open-minded so that they are always willing to learn new things including technologies that support their teaching career.

> *In my opinion, lecturers need to be adaptive, especially when they have to incorporate technology in their teaching. In the future, they must be good at delivering materials online. Those who struggle to adapt to the use of technology may face problems and challenges to provide engaging online classes for their students. They can fail to teach. (Itho, questionnaire)*

Itho, in her story, highlighted the importance of "adaptability to any changes" for a quality that a lecturer is to have, and this aligns with the experiences shared by other participants during the interviews, albeit using the terms, "flexibility and creativity." Additionally, the participants emphasized "sensitivity and passion" as further qualities that define an excellent lecturer.

> *I think lecturers have to love their profession, love what they do, and be super motivated in teaching their students. We can see how passionate they are from how they treat their students and give feedback on our assignments. (Amrih, interview)*

In describing the characteristics of an ideal lecturer, Amrih's views aligned with other participants, although they used different terms. Mirna, for example, valued a lecturer's sensitivity to students' circumstances, while Wilda prefered to use a word "friendly" to describe a lecturer who can establish a close relationship and connection with their students. Meanwhile, Itho and Amrih emphasized that passionate lecturers tend to engage their students by consistently providing meaningful feedback rather than just assigning tasks. From the participants' narratives, it can be concluded that lecturers' mindset and personality are crucial for educational success and should be prioritized in the process of recruiting lecturers and lecturer training.

Discussions

The findings are analyzed and synthesized based on the research questions and the emerging themes along with relevant literature and studies related to them.

Technical Issues in Implementing Blended Learning

Most participants reported various mental and emotional challenges due to internet access issues and limited ICT knowledge among students and lecturers in both online and Blended Learning (BL). These issues are likely very common and classical as they also happen in many other countries (Li, et al., 2023; Zainuddin & Keumala, 2018) including both developed and developing countries such as Ireland (Cullinan, et al., 2021), the USA (Gonzales, et al., 2018), and Vietnam (Le, et al., 2021). In Indonesia, numerous studies also highlight unstable internet connections as a persistent barrier to both online and offline learning (Prasetio, et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2020; UNICEF, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2021; GSM Association, 2020). In relation to English language teaching, this technical problem has also been a main obstacle (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Famularsih, 2020; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020; Agung, et al., 2020; Pasaribu & Dewi, 2021). Effective BL classes require urgent solutions to internet problems, as ICT tools, online resources, and stable connectivity are essential for student satisfaction and learning outcomes (Kintu, et al., 2017). Governments and universities must provide technical support and ensure reliable internet access for lecturers and students (Le, et al., 2021).

Lecturers also need to be aware of such issues and try to find ways to anticipate them when planning their lessons in class. However, when the issues of internet infrastructure have been resolved, another technical challenge to tackle is that both lecturers and students need to have sufficient knowledge of all related technological tools they are to use in BL classes. As emphasized by the participants, many Indonesian EFL lecturers and students are not familiar with various ICT learning tools and need to get some training. This resonates with other studies revealing similar findings in the context of Indonesia and other countries: lecturers' and students' lack of understanding of using online resources and learning applications (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Pasaribu & Dewi, 2021; Aljuaid, 2021; Rahim & Chandran, 2021; Sarwari et al., 2021).

All the technical issues discussed above should be a serious concern and must be a top priority for all education stakeholders, particularly policymakers in government and university leaders. Providing adequate infrastructure and training for lecturers and students to adapt to new learning modes is obviously their main responsibility. Students and lecturers may have been used to online learning, but the learning habits during the pandemic along with ongoing ICT innovations required them to learn and get familiar with new emerging online learning resources and tools, which must be different from what they knew before (Fuller, 2021). In addition, it is important for lecturers to keep on learning to find out ways and strategies when dealing with any kind of issues hindering their teaching in BL classes. They also need to help the institutions by giving some orientation to their students about the use of many online learning tools so that they can be familiar with them.

Class Disruptions and How to Tackle Them

All participants, reflecting on their learning experiences during the pandemic, revealed that disruptions were the main obstacles in class during the pandemic, a trend likely to persist due to extensive internet exposure. This aligns with Oraif and Elyas (2021), who found Arabic EFL students faced similar challenges, including family distractions and online activities, as did Caldwell's (2018) study on Japanese EFL learners. Such distractions reduce student engagement and participation, a concern echoed in numerous studies identifying key factors behind this issue. Many previous studies have also presented consistent findings in regard to the lack of student engagement, identifying several factors contributing to this situation (Dhawan, 2020; El-Sayad et al., 2021; Flammia et al., 2016; Green, 2016; Han & Yi, 2021; Murphy, 2020; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020; Pasaribu & Dewi, 2021; Plaisance, 2018; Sun, 2014). The participants recognize student engagement in online classes as a serious concern, given the diversity of attitudes toward online learning. They believed that positive attitudes do not guarantee consistent participation, as individuals' competencies and confidence levels also play a crucial role.

In light of the recent disruptions discussed earlier, online learning definitely poses significant challenges, especially for lecturers, who must employ more innovative instructional approaches and possess adequate ICT proficiency to ensure active student engagement in their

given lessons. (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020, Oraif & Elyas, 2021; Pradana & Syarifuddin, 2021; Prasetyanto et al., 2022). This implies that the BL approach combining both face-to-face and online activities should be creatively designed by anticipating these challenges and providing interactive lessons to increase the degree level of student active participation. Renandya and Jacobs (2021) suggest that in contemporary language teaching, the main focus is on ensuring active and comprehensive student involvement in both online and offline classes, despite the prevalent disruptions and distractions encountered in the digital age. In this regard, meaningful and purposeful tasks serve as the fundamental factors that determine the extent of this type of engagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). This means that Meaningful tasks are key to engagement, requiring interactive activities that promote authentic language use based on students' interests and needs (Ellis, 2019). Ellis, et al. (2019, p. 162) address that

> *"If an activity is meaningful for learners, they will be more willing to become involved in each performance in terms of voluntarily devoting their personal talents, time and energy into completing it."*

From this literature, it can be concluded that distractions in the digital era are becoming a big issue and challenge for teachers now and in the future. The abundance of disruptive content, games, and social media on the internet can divert students' attention from learning. To address this, teachers should create creative, innovative, and attractive Blended Learning activities to ensure high student engagement in spite of the online distractions they can get attracted to.

Essential Factors for Ideal Implementations of Blended Learning

Drawing on the findings, it can be implied that the success of BL implementation involves ideal class characteristics. To achieve this, lecturers must consider various aspects that impact the education process. The focus should be on learning objectives when combining online and physical meetings, rather than adhering to specific proportions of interactions. The key is to design a well-planned combination to reach the desired learning outcomes (Gayatri, et al., 2023). To improve autonomous learning as one of the goals of language education discussed earlier in this article, the BL approach also needs to be optimized by considering the appropriate and purposeful combination of online and offline modes (Wang & Zhang, 2022). Other

researchers also emphasize the importance of adaptations to new online language learning environments and ICT developments for promoting autonomous learning (Benson, 2007; Lai and Gu, 2011; Lewis, 2013; Rienties, et al., 2017; Shadiev & Yang, 2020; Zhang & Wu, 2009). Achieving these goals requires institutional and teacher support. Leaders must also provide adequate ICT resources, while lecturers should apply research-based instructional strategies to enhance engagement and learning quality (Marzano et al., 2001).

The participants' narratives indicate the crucial role of effective lecturers in implementing the engaging BL approach. They emphasized some essential qualities that lecturers need to have such as adaptability, receptiveness to change, attentiveness to students' needs, and passion for the profession. These qualities enable lecturers to improve their teaching skills, deliver well-prepared lessons, foster meaningful interactions, promote student engagement, and support their growth in line with learning objectives. These findings correspond to the literature review by Renandya and Jacobs (2021), which outlines nine qualities of an effective language teacher in the current era. These qualities, as identified in the existing literature, encompass the characteristics mentioned by the participants. These types of lecturers and teachers are the ones who can create and apply meaningful and purposeful tasks that will contribute to student engagement, motivation, and independent and autonomous learning (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Hence, a successful BL lesson entirely depends on meaningful classes that can only be realized by teachers and lecturers who have some relevant distinct qualities. This is finally in line with the principal goals of the BL approach which includes increasing learners' motivation, engagement, autonomy, and active involvement in class activities, leading to their sense of responsibility and independence in learning (Deniz, 2024).

Future Directions

Building on the findings of this study, future research should explore the long-term impact of Blended Learning on student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. Further investigations could focus on developing best practices for integrating digital tools effectively while addressing infrastructure and accessibility challenges. Additionally, research should examine how lecturers' pedagogical strategies evolve over time and the role of continuous professional development in optimizing BL implementation. Comparative studies across

different educational institutions and cultural contexts would also provide valuable insights into the scalability and adaptability of BL in diverse learning environments. Finally, future research should consider incorporating AI-driven personalization to enhance adaptive learning experiences and improve student support in BL settings. However, when conducting further research, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current study, which may influence the scope of future investigations. Firstly, due to the relatively small number of participants, the findings may not be universally applicable to all EFL learning contexts in both Indonesia and other countries. Additionally, the nature of a Narrative Inquiry study, which explores human subjectivity, can lead to varying interpretations when analyzing the collected data.

Conclusion and Implication

The narratives of the participants are expected to shed light on significant issues concerning the implementation of Blended Learning (BL) in Indonesia. For the participants, these problems were mainly caused by the lack of both students' and lecturers' understanding of the approach, their multiple interpretations of it, and unequal distribution of infrastructure although they were already familiar with online learning for their experience during the pandemic time. Having encountered these challenges, the participants expressed a desire for BL lessons that need to be applied with meaningful conditions and purposeful compositions to enhance their learning processes and achieve their goals of learning. To effectively apply such classes, the participants highlighted key characteristics of an effective class and lecturer, which echo other recent studies and scholars' notions. They perceived that an ideal BL class requires adequate learning facilities and infrastructure, as well as careful and serious planning to provide meaningful activities, which can only be done by lecturers who have a sense of adaptability, flexibility, sensitivity, and passion. It is hoped that the study offers valuable insights for educators, teacher educators, lecturers, and researchers in English Language Teaching (ELT) in order to be able to identify and decide appropriate teaching methods and approaches for their current and future BL classes, particularly in the rapidly changing world where AI is becoming pervasively utilized in education.

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