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Unveiling the successes of religious school leavers in learning English proficiency course via a blended approach

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Abstract---The blended learning approach has achieved great success in the teaching of languages. It has been widely used to teach students at all levels, including university students from religious schools, who continue to grow in number nowadays. Unfortunately, these religious school leavers lacked of guidance in using their own handheld technology for English language learning. Therefore blended learning is the most suitable approach to teach these learners who rely on instructors for guidance. This study, with the qualitative research methods, aims to explore and determine the achievements of religious school leavers in the course of English Proficiency taught via a blended approach. The participants of this study were selected purposefully from six faculties and they are all first-semester students. The researcher conducted a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups, as well as compiled online reflections and document analysis. The data gathered were analysed using thematic analysis with the assistance of Nvivo software. The findings revealed that (1) the participants perceived the blended learning approach over the traditional method (2) the blended learning approach has successfully contributed to the unexpected successes that include adjustment, positive feelings and remarkable progress in learning the English language. (3) the learners experience positive learning through a blended learning approach. It is recommended that future research could focus on different courses and broaden the scope of the study by looking into the effectiveness of blended learning.

Keywords---blended learning, English proficiency course, successes, religious school leavers.

Introduction

Today's learners are "... all" native speakers "of the digital language of computers, video games and the internet" and are thus called digital natives (Prensky, 2001). Oxford defines digital natives as those born or brought up during the digital technology era. This therefore includes those leavers from Religious schools who were also born in this era. With the advent of technology, these learners are expected to be independent, proactive and prolific, where they can access information at their fingertips anytime and anywhere. They live in the era where everything is just a click away. This is supported by Prensky (2001) in his article claiming that these digital natives' learners spent their entire life surrounded by and using computers, videogames, smartphones, and other tools of the digital age. These are the "Net generation" (Tapscotts 1998) and to engage with them, experts have generally agreed that there is a need to include other modes of delivery and adopt some 21st-century pedagogical approaches, such as self-paced, self-access, and independent learning and learner-centered activities. Thus, this study explores the experience of Malaysian Religious school leavers undergoing blended learning English course in a public university and the accidental discovery of achievements gained by them.

Literature Review

Definitions of Blended Learning

Discussion on blended learning can be addressed from a few angles. One is about the various definitions of blended learning. On one hand, the majority of definitions of blended learning suggest richness, broadness and also depth of the area; while on the other hand, reaching a consensus on one single definition has become difficult. Google alone provides more than 1.69 million pages for the search term 'definition of blended learning'. The growing body of literature presented the definition that seems to share the core idea of blended learning which touched on the main aspect of blending which is the mixing of two teaching approaches (face-to-face and online). It is discovered that the word 'blended' is used interchangeably with its synonym for example; 'hybrid' (Colis and Moonen 2001), 'combined' (Smith, 2001), 'integrated', and 'mixed' (Franks 2002). These word associations suggest the combination of two or more methods, whereas, the words like 'combination' (Osguthrope & Graham 2003), 'integration', 'mixture' (Gulbahar and Madran 2009), (Rovai and Jordan 2004) (Thorne 2003) and (Yildirim 2007) imply that the amalgamation of two methods in the teaching and learning process.

Religious School Students and Their Traits

Rosnani (1996), Sahari & Langgulung (1999) and Abdul Hamid, a religious advisor to the Prime Minister (Berita Harian 26/Feb/2003) have carried out a number of surveys and writings on several weaknesses of Religious religious

schools; its curriculum, lack of amenities and financial supports as well as poor administration. Despite the mentioned weaknesses of Religious religious schools, some Muslim parents via the informal conversations and interviews revealed that they were still interested to enroll their children in the school due to the following reasons; (1) Due to the high cost of living, many Muslim parents are both working full time thus they have very limited time to teach their own children and expect the schools to act on their behalf. (2) Some of these Muslim parents are interested to teach their own children, unfortunately, they themselves have no or very limited knowledge regarding Al-Quran and '*Fardhu Ain*'. (3) Some parents feel that religious subject at the national school is inadequate or failed to meet their expectation. (4) Many Muslim parents are aware and worried about the moral decay (social ills) in society especially among the youth. Therefore, sending their children to religious schools is the best way to prepare their children for a better life.

Due to the above reasons, it was not a surprise that there was a mushrooming of People Religious Religious Schools (SAR) in Malaysia because parents were concerned about their children's Religious knowledge while the national school curriculum seemed insufficient to cater to the need of parents. This has resulted in an increased number of students who have completed their studies in Religious schools and pursue their tertiary education in Religious-based universities or colleges locally and abroad. Delving into Malaysian tertiary education, this is in line with the government's vigorous promotion of Malaysia as an international education hub (MOHE 2007: 25, 35). The following Table 1 illustrates the traits of Religious school students as reported by a few studies in Malaysia. They possessed the characteristics in their school hood, and it worsens when they bring the traits together in their university life.

Table 1
Characteristics of Religious school students

Author(s)	Findings
Rosni (2007, 2013)	Students are passive (wait and listen to what is conveyed by the teacher) They are uncooperative. (do not work together among them in that process of learning) They never produce their own opinions or give a conclusion on what they have learned They become sluggish and inactive in particular to convey their opinions and views. They do not have the confidence in understanding the lessons they learned on their own. They become too dependent on their teacher. They do not have their own ability to comprehend the reading materials. They can be successful in the exam just by memorizing the contents of the exam key but, they will be unable to cope with the outside world. They are more comfortable keeping quiet.
Syakirah (2004)	The students can't afford to understand the subject. They are not keen to ask questions, or interact with teachers and each other.

	They are not prepared to learn
	They do not have the courage to talk in the classroom, especially when asked to read the text.
	They will try to avoid asking questions to the teacher.
Hanan, M.	The students prefer to sit and listen to the teacher.
(2011)	They feel afraid to speak and involve in the class interactions.

Religious School Leavers (ISLs)

It has been established by the past studies, as reported in Table 1 of the religious school students who possessed specific traits. The Religious school leavers, therefore, shared the same traits as the students of Religious school as they bring in the characteristics that were instilled into their university life. Looking at the importance of this study, it is crucial to deeply explore their achievements in the English language other than the grades that they obtained at the end of the semester. This is to find out how these groups of students learn the English language as some of them treat English as equally important as the Arabic language, and there are also students who felt that English is a foreign language to them.

Methodology

A multiple-case study design has been selected for this study because it fits into the criteria of a case study defined by Creswell (2009). “the study of a case within a real-life contemporary context or setting”. Creswell also emphasizes a critical element of the case study approach to define a case that can be bounded or described within certain parameters, such as a specific place and time. This study focuses on a particular context in which it looks at the Religious school leavers’ experiences in a Malaysian university undergoing a blended learning approach in English language courses.

Moreover, a case study approach is flexible as much as the design structure is not fixed and pre-determined, while at the same time not as loose as a traditional ethnographic might have it. In fact, case study research permits an in-depth account of events and situations and allows for a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Burgess et al. 2006). A range of techniques including observation, structured, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, survey questionnaires, and other documentary evidences are used in the case study research. This study employed semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and other documentary evidences as the techniques to gather data. This study employed a multiple case study as the tradition of inquiry. Therefore, the participants of this study were not just people but also includes texts and documents. This allows detailed inquiry of the phenomenon understudy.

As this study employs qualitative research, it involves a small number of participants that can really provide rich insights into the phenomenon at hand (Bloomberg & Volpe 2008; Creswell 2012; Silverman 2010). The triangulation concept will be utilised in this study to gather the data from the two main groups of participants to ensure a variety of sources. The two groups mentioned are

student participants and university lecturers. Aligned with the qualitative nature, a purposeful sampling strategy is used for this study. Referring to Merriam (2009) advice that there should be two levels of selection. The first selection is to choose 'the case' and the next one is to select 'within the case'. A set of criteria has to be set to guide each selection for every level. The procedures to select the participants are tabulated in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Selection Procedures of Study Participants

Procedure	Task(s)
1. Selection of participants will be done from 4 different faculties. Faculty of Quranic & Sunnah Studies* Faculty of Major Language Studies* Faculty of Science & Technology** Faculty of Engineering & Built Environment**	
* Social science faculties in which the medium of instructions & references are majority in Arabic (core subjects) ** Science Stream faculties with wide exposure on English (references, etc)	<i>Online forum 1</i> A day without technology.
1.2. Two online forums posted on GOALS. All students from the above faculties have to participate.	<i>Online forum 2</i> Should technology replace teachers?
1.3. The participants are selected based on their active participation in the forum. They will be informed on the following requirements which is going to be the set of criterion for the selection : i. She/He must actively participate – giving ideas, responding to friends' responses ii. She/He must use the English language fully	
1.4. 3-4 students that fit into the criterion will be selected from each faculty.	Fill in the consent form and sign.
1.5. Selected students were approached and asked for their willingness to be the participants in the study.	

A set of criteria is determined prior to the first selection level which is to select the case. The main criterion is the participants must be first-semester undergraduate students coming from Religious schools and undergoing an English language course at a university. While for the second level of selection, the participants were chosen among a group of undergraduate students who were taking an English course from four different faculties at a public institution.

The procedures began with seeking permission from the course coordinator to involve the students who are taking the course. After the permission is obtained, in the second week of the semester, the researcher will post an online forum on the students' Learning Management System (LMS) known as GOALS in this institution and get the students from different faculties to participate. The participants were informed of the requirements which are the set of criteria for the selection : i) She/He must be actively participating – giving ideas, responding to friends' responses ii) She/He must use the English language fully. Once all the students responded to the online forum, the potential participants that fit into the criteria were selected. The finalists were then decided based on the criterion, they were approached and asked for their consent to be the participants of this study. This study took place at one of the public universities in Malaysia. Twelve first-year undergraduate students from four faculties were involved in this study. The participants were all Religious school leavers and their age span ranged from 19-21 years old. The first-semester students were purposely selected for this study due to the fresh experience of blended learning that they have gone through since they left their previous experience in Religious pre-university education which was different. The participation of the students was selected on the basis of active participation in the two online forums posted by the lecturer in their Learning Management System or known as Global Open Access Learning System (GOALS) in this university.

There was another similarity taken into account in the selection of these students - they have low English language proficiency which is determined by the band they obtained in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). MUET is used as a yardstick in determining students' English language proficiency for the purpose of admission into Malaysian public universities. According to the Malaysian Examination Council (MPM) that develops and administers MUET, the MUET syllabus "seeks to consolidate the English language ability of pre-university students to enable them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary level, in line with the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy". Reading, speaking, listening, and writing are the four major components being tested in MUET. MUET results are presented in the form of scores that explain an individual's command of the language, graded on a 6-band scale – Band 6 as the highest score, and Band 1 as the lowest score (Malaysian Examination Council, 2006). The students who participated in this study obtained the lower band in MUET, from Band 1 to Band 2. Their details were tabulated in the following table (Table 2.1)

Table 2.1 Details of Participants Under Study

Code	Gender	Hometown	Age	Faculty	MUET Band
S1	Female	Permatang Pauh, Pulau Pinang	19	Faculty of Science and Technology	2
S2	Female	Taiping, Perak	20	Faculty of Science and Technology	2
S3	Female	Besut, Terengganu	19	Faculty of Science and Technology	2
S4	Male	Kuala Nerang,	19	Faculty of Engineering &	2

S5	Male	Kedah Kuala Kangsar,	19	Built Environment Faculty of Engineering & Built Environment	2
S6	Female	Perak Rawang,	19	Faculty of Engineering & Built Environment	2
S7	Female	Selangor Muar, Johor	19	Faculty of Quranic and Sunnah studies	2
S8	Male	Pasir Mas,	19	Faculty of Quranic and Sunnah studies	1
S9	Male	Kelantan Bachok,	19	Faculty of Quranic and Sunnah studies	2
S10	Female	Kelantan Sungai Besar,	20	Faculty of Major Language Studies	2
S11	Female	Selangor Bachok,	20	Faculty of Major Language Studies	2
S12	Male	Kelantan Pelabuhan Klang, Selangor	20	Faculty of Major Language Studies	2

This study used the 'semi-structured life-world interview' for individuals as proposed by Kvale (2007 : 10). This type of interview is appropriate for this study as it has some prepared questions to get the interviewees to discuss the issues at hand – their experiences in undergoing a blended learning course. The protocol is prepared beforehand and some of the questions were probed related to the tasks that they were required to complete to explore the achievements they gained in learning the language. It was important for the researcher to ensure that all possible aspects of the blended learning are touched on and simultaneously the interview session could be very open to allow freedom for the participants to share their experiences. This study consists of two sets of interviews. The first set was with the student participants and the second set was with the lecturers. In the first set, there were three waves of the interview at three distinct times – in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the semester while the second set of interviews was only once. The interviews were all conducted face-to-face, recorded and transcribed verbatim.

A focus group interview is chosen to be one of the methods in this study because it is widely considered a useful tool for exploring “not only how people think but what they think and why they think that way” (Kitzinger 1995, p. 299). Besides being useful for delving into people’s experiences and attitudes, the group processes arising from the discussion, could help participants to explore and to clarify their views and opinions in relation to what was expressed by others in the group. It was believed that the group dynamics would generate more authentic and richer data that would not be as easily accessible in the more restrained one-to-one interview (Berg 2004, Kitzinger 1995). Therefore, seeing the importance of this concept, this study proposes to collect the data using this method. The participants are divided into four groups according to their respective faculties. The group division is as follows; Group A Faculty of Science & Technology, Group B Faculty of Engineering & Built Environment, Group C Faculty of Quranic & Sunnah Studies and Group D Faculty of Major Language Studies.

The online postings were used as the source of data for this study as it is equivalent to the diary entries that are utilised in many qualitative studies involving blended learning. It is also much more exciting and a way of keeping abreast with the current trend. The students were required to write reflections on a fortnight basis on their blended learning experiences in an English language course. The specific task for the weekly reflections was 'Share the successes and challenges that you have experienced this week'. The students posted five reflections at the end of the semester. All the students' feedbacks were the primary data for this study.

Findings and Discussion

This study sought to explore the participants' achievements in undergoing a blended learning course. From this study, there are 10 salient subthemes emerged from the data collection which fall under three main themes namely the (i) adjustment, (ii) positive feelings, and (iii) progress, and on the pretext of being Religious school leavers and newbies in the blended learning approach. The themes are illustrated in Figure 1 (output from Nvivo11) and Table 3 and they are discussed in the subsections below.

Figure 1 : Map of Achievements by Religious School Leavers (Output from Nvivo11)



Table 3 : Themes and subthemes emerged

Themes	Subthemes
i Adjustment	Accept new approach Utilizing technology Enjoy new learning environment
ii Feelings	Optimistic emotions Motivated Increase in confidence
iii Progress	Improvement Learn a lot Encouraging results Expand vocabulary repertoire

Theme 1 : Adjustment – Accept new approach

One of the great achievements gained as reported by the participants is to accept the new teaching and learning approach which is blended learning approach. Most participants claimed to experience the conventional method of learning the language in their previous school, therefore accepting a new approach in learning is considered as a great achievement to them. In accepting the new approach implanted in the university, S₁ reported on undergoing a change by saying “kena combine, kalau tak rasa boring fed-up malas nak baca” [need to combine, if not I felt bored fed-up lazy to read].

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Theme 1 : Adjustment - Utilising technology

Before the participants embark on their learning journey at the university, most of them use technology to communicate and socialize with their peers and members of their families per se. They did not utilize their devices for the sake of learning.

S₁₁ shared what make [me] motivate to learn more outside the classroom is, it can plug into the technology, students would create the projects or assignment using the computer to allow students to collaborates with each other.learn outside the classroom , it get more fun and no bored , lecture can combined many ways to make students to more enjoy with any subjects either in the classroom or outside classroom S₁₁_int03)

S₁₂ agreed on the use of technology in language learning, make it easy, learning has been widened, with technology we can search a lot, less sleepy as compared to using book. Saved time to flip over the book pages, can access a lot of information with technology] (S₁₂_FGI_Group B)

Another outstanding achievement made by the participants of this study is the adjustment that they did in which they were able to adjust the use of technology from communication only, to use it for learning the language. The blended learning approach has successfully tuned their mindset and norm, especially with their smartphone. They used to have a casual conversation with family and friends via WhatsApp Messenger before but managed to use the same social network apps formally, to learn the language.

I like that WhatsApp and Telegram also help me very well in receiving notes and updates about the course. (S₁_OR_Week4)

Researcher : Do you like the use of technology to learn English in university. To what extent?

Participant : I like. He did not only use the book... he used different source for website.. and use WhatsApp, too. Made us closer. Easy to ask anything.. (S12_int01)

This finding echoed the study conducted by Astarilla & Warman (2017), in which the students read more texts and interacted with their peers through WhatsApp, thus improving their understanding of reading. It was also found that blended learning was more successful through WhatsApp than just face-to-face teaching and learning activities. Integrating mobile technology into a traditional face-to-face classroom creates an optimal learning environment for language learning since it enhances students' interaction and promotes autonomous learning outside the classroom (Warman, 2017).

Theme 1 : Adjustment - Enjoy new learning environment

Most of the participants made comparisons between their previous school with their current university. They reported on the enjoyment of the new learning environment in university that is much different from the ambiance in school. S7 shared that [this] is a new environment for studies and not feel to fall asleep while S8 and S9 said that they had learned a lot of new things in university. (S8 & S9_int02)

S1 compared her experience at the previous school with the current experience in the university in which she said it's more interesting from my school. The use of technology. When I were in school, teacher only use textbook and whiteboard. (S1_int03)

S4 when asked during the interview, preferred the environment at university than in her previous school. It was obviously uttered as the following;

Researcher : Which environment do you like most in learning English? Your previous school or in university?

Participant : In university. My previous school do not use technology much to help their student. But in university my lecturer use a lot of technologies. (S4_int02)

The blended learning approach has shifted the participants learning environment from bored and traditional style to a more enjoyable and interesting one. The adjustment of learning ambiance has indirectly changed the participants' attitude and gained a new perspective on language learning.

Theme 2 : Feelings - Optimistic emotions

The participants of this study expressed their emotions clearly during the interview and shared their feelings via the online reflections. All of them reported enjoying their study despite facing many challenges. There are seven positively connoted emotions that emerged from this study as bold in the following extracts; *Until this week, I'm really **enjoying** because my lecturer used a lot of tools to teach like GOALS and what's app group to give us information and task. (S2_OR_W6)*

*I'm so **excited** because I never done this before. In our first class of English, we had given a piece of paper to draw our own picture and no need to write our name. After that the lecturer collected it and gave back to anyone randomly. So, the task is we have to guess whose picture is that! (S6_OR_W4)*

*I like blended learning approach because for me it's very **fun** and interesting (S2_OR_W4)*

From my first week in this semester, it's going well, even at first we have some conflict about the schedule. I feel good learning English with Dr Su. (S6_int03)

No disappointment, very happy, do some exercise, do online on websites, listening test in library in audio room,... (S5_FGI_GB)

For me, blended learning is interesting because we can play with the games in class with this subject and easy to understand and get the information through GOALS and fast update from our lecturer. (S2_FGI_GA)

Observing the language choices of the participants, the online reflection journal and interview transcripts show that the participants have positive reactions to the use of blended learning in learning English. The use of adjectives like enjoy, excited, fun, good, happy, and interesting displays clear relation between the participants' feelings and their experience of learning English via a blended approach. All the positive feelings that they expressed on learning the language in that particular semester is one of the serendipitous achievements gained by them. The excitement, enjoyment and gratification of learning the language via that approach are beyond the final grade that they obtained because this is the stepping stone for them to learn the language in a different way.

Theme 2 : Feelings - Increase in confidence

The participants conveyed their feelings of confidence especially when it came to speaking. Almost all mentioned that they felt more confident in doing presentations. In fact, a few participants, S said and wrote about their gaining confidence in more than one instance. The two following excerpts show S1 expressing her confidence in her online reflection and in the interview. She wrote "and she said that *"in university I learnt many approaches, I am more confident to talk in English."* (S1_int03)

Some of them claimed that they had just started to gain their confidence in English when they were in university like S7 *"I gained confidence in English only when I in USIM"*(S7_int02). S8 said that he had improved, *"There were an improvement. In terms of confidence with English Language"*. S10 and S11 also became more confident after going through the blended learning course. *"I feel more confident to answer."* (S10_int01) *"I can give many opinions"* (S10_int02). These are echoed by S2 who said that *the activities help with [her] confidence in speaking.*(S2_int03)

The elaboration presented in the above paragraphs infers that the participants gained their confidence by means of blended learning. The communication activities conducted inside the classroom and supplemented by online activities were useful to boost their confidence in using the language. In line with Emelyanova & Voronia's research, the use of LMS as an effective learning tool in enhancing the confidence of students in their own abilities, and help teachers increase awareness of their own potential. Additional computer-based practice gives greater confidence to the learner that acquiring these skills is manageable and frees up more time for productive class communication (Emelyanova & Voronia, 2017).

Theme 2 : Feelings : Motivated

Besides gaining confidence, participants of this study reported that they felt more motivated to learn English. Almost all said that they were motivated to learn English even when they were outside the classroom.

S11 shared how it makes [me] motivated to learn more outside the classroom is , it can plug into the technology , students would create the projects or assignment using the computer to allow students to collaborates with each other. Learn outside the classroom , it get more fun and no bored , lecture can combined many ways to make students to more enjoy with any subjects either in the classroom or outside classroom.(S11_OR_W3)

S12 shared about his significant achievement which he said *"My first success is to get rid from lazy stage to get more interested to learn the language."* (S12_int03)

A few participants like S4 & S5 shared that they both were motivated by their lecturers.

She keeps give us motivation. (S4_int03)

For the last class she gave more motivation to us, give some motivational quote, to keep improve ourselves and I keep remind what she said. (S5_int03)

The above extracts infer that the participants have found their motivation in learning the language, both intrinsically and extrinsically. Some of them were motivated by the people around them like their lecturers and peers, while some were motivated by themselves. Their increase in motivation is due to the approach used to learn the language that made them interested not only inside but also outside the classroom.

Theme 3 : Progress – Improvement

After a semester of blended learning, it was gratified to see the students' progress in which they had improved in any way. It was evidently expressed as follow during the interview;

It is better than before (S1_int02)

I can see a change in myself towards English learning. (S1_int03)

I feel better than before, feel excited (S6_FGI_Group B)

The improvement of the participants is evinced when the lecturer who taught them the course claimed that;

The students seem to show significant improvement in learning English and they are developing good attitude and motivation. (L5_int)

It is also noteworthy to look at the excerpts from S9 during the focus group interview as follow;

Researcher : Think back over all the weeks you have attended the English course from week1 until week 9 in the university and tell me your fondest memory.

Participant : When I learnt, I felt that ohh.. like this.. like this.. only then I knew. When I was at school before, I didn't understand. The lecturer explained more detailed, friends support each other. This does not happen in school, people were doing their own businesses. (S9_int02)

From the above excerpts, it is evident that language learning in the university has significantly improved the learners in many ways. The learners have transformed to be better language learners than before and gained an understanding on certain language topics with the assistance of lecturers and strong support from peers. The improvement that the participants gained shows that they are well-progressing in learning the language via the blended approach.

Theme 3 : Progress - Learn a lot

From week 1 until week 6 I am in USIM, I learnt a lot of things. At first I am a bit worried with my English course because not good in English such as speaking because I'm not so confident and sometimes also in writing. However until this week, I'm really enjoying because my lecturer used a lot of tools to teach like GOALS and WhatsApp group to give us information and task. (S2_OnlineReflection_Week6)

From the first until this week, I learn a lot from English class, because before this I have been thought using textbook, but now using both approaches blended learning, make me more interesting to learn English and make me more understand. (S1_int03)

The above excerpts extracted from the online reflection and interview have clearly expressed the participants' progresses in their learning throughout this study. The course delivered via a blended approach has undoubtedly taught them a lot of things. This finding suggests that the participants not only perceived the approach used in learning the language, but they benefited a lot from it. This would be the fecund discovery contributed from this study that the blended approach has successfully taught the learners a lot of lessons that were meaningful for them.

Theme 3 : Progress – Encouraging results

The participants were also evoked by encouraging results of the formative assessments throughout the semester. There are three formative assessments that they have to sit which are listening test, speaking test and grammar quiz as the requirement of the course. The following are some of the extracts from students' interviews and online reflections with regard to their achievements;

I felt really happy because I got good marks. (S10_OR_W10)
listening test proud because got high mark, (S7_FGI_Group B)
I felt quiet shocked too, knowing the result where I got 13 out of 15 for speaking.
(S8_int03)

This is one of the remarkable achievements obtained by the participants in this study in learning the language. They entered the university with low band in the MUET examination (band 1 and band 2) and learned the language via the blended approach. Thus, obtaining good encouraging results in the formative assessments throughout the semester infer that the students' were making progress.

Theme 3 : Progress - Expand vocabulary repertoire

The participants of this study expressed clearly in the interview that the blended learning approach had expanded their vocabulary repertoire. They claimed that blended learning approach helped them to increased their knowledge in vocabulary. This is accord with the study conducted by Vasbieva et al (2016) that revealed students prefer blended learning strategy than the traditional classroom based learning, as it improves the students vocabulary knowledge and allows them to work independently at their own pace. (Vasbieva et al. 2016). Shamsuddin, H (2019)

The following are some extracts from the interview which highlighted on the expansion of vocabulary repertoire among the participants understudy;

The benefit that got.... Increased more new words... vocab... (S11_int02)

Researcher : In what way blended learning approach help you to learn English in university?

Participant : It helps to add my vocabs, because my vocabs is very low, I can improve in university from the task given, like hometown task, I get many vocabs from that task. (S5_FGI_Group A)

The activities conducted both inside and outside the classroom helped to increase vocabulary knowledge among the learners. They will be able to master the language if they have a wide vocabulary repertoire.

Conclusion

The overarching understanding that emerged from this study is that Religious school leavers' experience in learning English is unique in ways that influence how blended learning should be used in language teaching and learning specifically to this group of learners. This study shed light on the serendipitous achievements gained by the learners undergoing a blended approach -thus helping improve the quality of English language learning, break the monotony of the traditional learning and open up a new pathway in language teaching and learning (Thang, 2012). The participants seemed to have positive attitudes and perceived blended learning as an approach to teaching and learning over the traditional approach.

The blending of face-to-face activities inside the classroom and online activities supplemented outside the classroom is proven to help learners accomplish their language learning journey with unanticipated achievements. Their achievements constitute the adjustment made from their past experience at school, the positive feelings they have had during the semester, and remarkable progress throughout the learning journey. Lessons should be blended to meet the various needs and backgrounds of the learners. Teachers should endeavour to integrate the use of ICT into the teaching and learning process, even if it is challenging for them to meet the diverse demands of their learners. Learners will be more motivated to learn once technology has been integrated into the ESL classroom.

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