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Blended Language Learning Strategies used among Religious School Leavers in an English Language Course

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Abstract

Although much research has been done on university students' language learning strategies in EFL and ESL settings, little has been written and said about 21st-century university students and the strategies they use to improve their second language skills. The importance of English in today's world is undeniable suggesting a need to conduct study on the learning strategies used by today's learners, particularly university students, to improve their English language skills. Therefore, the goal of this study is to discover the learning strategies that a group of undergraduates used to learn the language through a blended learning approach. One-to-one semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, students' reflective journals and documentation were used to collect data, which were then analyzed thematically using Nvivo12 software. A total of 12 first-year undergraduate students from a public university participated in this study. Three themes emerged from the data analysis which are the categories of Blended Language Learning Strategies (BLLS) namely, in-class strategies, out-of-class strategies and online strategies. The findings revealed that when using a blended learning approach to learn English, participants employed a combination of strategies in both contexts - inside the classroom and online settings. Implications and suggestions are offered for instructors or language practitioners, specifically in tertiary education settings.

Keywords: *Blended Learning, Blended Language Learning Strategies, English Language Course, English Language Teaching and Learning, Tertiary Education*

INTRODUCTION

Technology's advancement has embraced essential aspects of language learning at all levels of education to improve the quality of teaching and learning processes and enable learners to become autonomous. (Sari and Wahyudin, 2019; Aminatun and Oktaviani, 2019). Each learner employs specific strategies to achieve goals in language learning. Learning a language requires the use of strategies because they make things easier, faster, more enjoyable, more effective and more adaptable to new situations. Despite the fact that there has been a lot of research on language learning and blended learning, few studies have looked into the language learning strategies of 21st-century students. This has sparked more curiosity about how these learners select and control their strategies to learn the language both inside and outside the classroom.

Since the 1970s, language learning strategies have been given a lot of attention because of the critical role they play in language learning. Many scholars have defined language learning strategies differently, focusing on how learners deal with the information they receive and the strategies they employ. (Cohen & Henry, 2019; Hardan, 2013).

Oxford (1990), one of the most well-known experts on language learning strategies, defines that direct strategies directly involve the target language, and entail language processing in the mind. Memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies are among them. Metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, on the other hand, provide indirect support for language learning.

Long before the twenty-first century, blended learning was widely used to teach language, and it is still the preferred method today. "Blended learning systems," as defined by Graham (2006), are learning systems that "combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction." Poon (2013: 1) says that the two

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delivery methods are meant to complement one another. Blended learning is an approach that refers to combining internet and digital media with traditional classroom formats that require the physical presence of the teacher and students (Frieden, 2012). In Malaysia, many higher institutions have implemented blended learning because of its effectiveness as a teaching and learning approach (Haryani et al., 2012).

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative research and multiple case study design. It used two methods of data gathering, semi-structured interviews and online reflective notes to ensure the study's quality, rigour and trustworthiness of findings. In this study, purposive sampling with a specific set of criteria was used to achieve the study's purpose, i.e., to explore how 21st-century learners learn the language both in the classroom and online.

Research Design

The main aim of this study is to gather an in-depth understanding of how the learners learn the language via blended learning, thus, a qualitative case study research design is appropriate to be used. According to Yin (2003), a qualitative case study enables the researcher to answer "how" and "why" questions.

Research Participants

The key participants of this study are the students that have fulfilled the criteria set by the researchers. They are the first semester students with low MUET Bands (Band 1 and 2) taking an English Proficiency course that is conducted via a blended approach. These students are the 21st-century learners, also known as "the net generation" or "digital natives" in K-12 and undergraduate education, are often defined as those born after 1980 (after the realization of the personal computer).

The procedures of recruiting participants for this study started with seeking consent from the course coordinator (gatekeeper) to involve the students taking the course. After consent was obtained, on the second week of the semester, the researcher posted an online forum on the students' Learning Management System (LMS) and received students from different faculties that participated. The participants were informed of the requirements, which were the set of criteria for the selection : i) They must actively participate – giving ideas, responding to friends' responses, ii) They must use the English language fully. Once all the students respond to the online forum, the most active participants that fit the criteria have been selected.

Table 1 displays the details of the selected participants of this study. To ensure their confidentiality, they are given IDs that were used throughout the study.

Table 1 : Information of the participants

Participant ID	Age	Gender	MUET band
S1	20	Male	Band 1
S2	20	Female	Band 2
S3	20	Female	Band 2
S4	20	Male	Band 2
S5	19	Female	Band 1
S6	21	Female	Band 2
S7	20	Female	Band 2
S8	20	Female	Band 2
S9	20	Male	Band 2
S10	21	Female	Band 2
S11	19	Female	Band 2
S12	19	Male	Band 2

Data Gathering Method and Procedures

The primary data gathering methods for this study were the interview and document analysis. The interviews (written as Int) entailed semi-structured, unstructured, and focused group interviews (FGI) with the participants. While for the document analysis, this study gathers online reflective notes (written as OR) and other related documents from the participants. The following is the diagram on the procedures to collect the data.

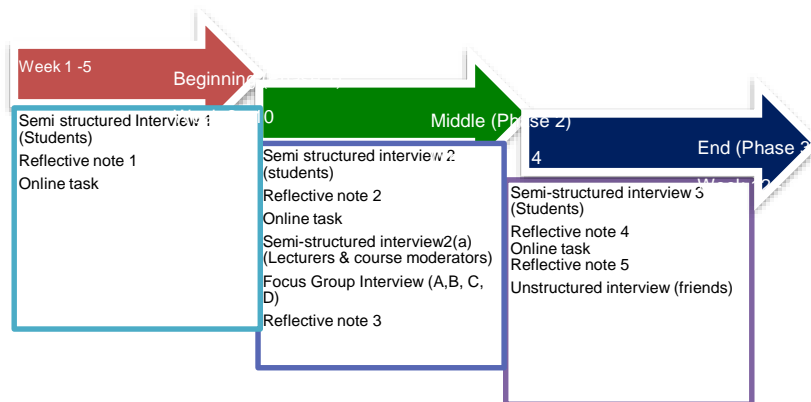


Figure 1 : Data Collection procedures

Referring to figure 1 above, the first semi-structured one-to-one interview with the participants were done in Phase 1, lasted for 20 to 25 minutes, with the interview questions (refer to interview protocol in appendix 1) divided into five parts which include i) learning experience in previous school ii) learning experience in university iii) differences to learn in school and university iv) blended learning approach v) plans or strategies. The second set of semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather more insights from the participants. It took place in the middle of the semester while towards the end of the semester, there were another set of semi-structured interview conducted with the student participants. The second interview focused on another three sections: students' attitudes and experiences of blended learning, evaluation on the use of blended learning, and changes that they experienced through the learning journey. In the final interview, the participants are allowed to add further comments and provide recommendations for the betterment of the course in future. Both interview sessions were recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded according to the constructed themes, where any similar or identical themes identified were grouped. In triangulating the primary data obtained from the interviews (written as Int), the participants are asked to write their online reflective notes on the course in the final week of the semester.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data on BLLS used by the participants in this study were reported by their attitudes and behaviors, the participant's beliefs about good ways to learn the target language, and their plans to become better language learners. The BLLS thus include all activities done, believed in, observed, or planned, and occurred both during face-to-face sessions in the classroom and online sessions outside of the classroom, precisely, their formal English language course. These BLLSs are used by participants in face-to-face (both inside and outside the classroom) and online learning sessions to assist them in performing a language task or simply learning and improving their English language skills.

The BLLSs reported in this study are categorized into three categories; 1) in-class strategies 2) out-of-class strategies 3) online strategies. Figure 2 depicts the key findings of this study;

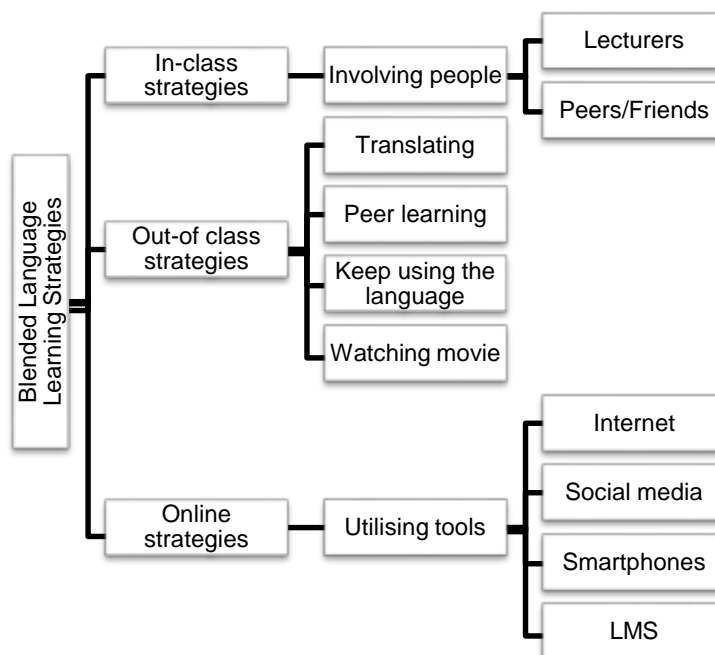


Figure 2 : Key findings on blended language learning strategies

In-class strategies

i. Involving people

In learning the language inside the classroom, all participants involve people by seeking help and assistance from different people in various methods of learning the language. The participants asked for help from their lecturers to consult about their essay writing. The following excerpts best represent the involvement of people around them in learning the language inside the classroom:

*We have to **consult with Dr** about our essay that we do during mid sem break. (S2,OR)*

*Then we have to **consult with Dr Su**. She will correct us, review our writing. (S6,OR)*

***Dr Su checked our essays** that she had already told us to do before. (S6, OR)*

Lecturers are thought to have a substantial impact and play a significant role in the learning experience of this group of learners. This is because they have been instilled with the 'concept of the *guru* (teacher)' in their quest for knowledge since school. This has displayed by an excerpt said by S2, "*in my school, when she taught us, she would **insert some of the religious matters** during our class for example about manners with teachers or manner in everything that we do. Other than that, she will make sure that we will make it important to respect the knowledge and the source of the knowledge. Such as, 1. books, 2. people who teach us and 3. study places (S2, int).*

English learning in the university requires the existence of lecturers as the knowledge provider, informers of the course and the subject matter expert. The active role played by lecturers has impacted the participants positively to gain interest in the course and learn the language with the integration of technology.

Due to their poor command of the English language and thus lack of confidence, which made them hesitant to use it, the active role of the lecturer in motivating the students to speak is a productive method as it will arouse the students' interest to talk frequently. It provided a better opportunity for the participants to apply the English language since they desire to learn it. This is best illustrated by the following excerpts in interview;

*"Better at university. When **we communicate with the lecturer, we cannot use Malay**.. But in school, we just talk like usual. (S4_Int)*

The second set of people under the theme of ‘involving people’ is friends/peers. Their circle of friends includes roommates, classmates, seniors in the course and their former schoolmates. The participants’ friends in this study involved in two significant ways; as someone to seek help from and to practice English with.

Firstly, the participants reported that they sought help from their friends for many reasons. Below are the responses of the participants;

Friends and teachers can help more than in the previous school. (S2, Int)

Sometimes I ask my roommates to help me with suitable words. (S2,Int)

Sometimes I try to communicate. With friends.. For example.. After prayer, what time to go to play? (S4_Int)

In doing the task, I have to search.. keep searching a lot of information with our friends.. So it will become easier to do work. We also get views from our friends. I appreciate it a lot. Very appreciate to comment. (S4_Int)

My friends, two of my friends that I shared with you before, I keep communicating with them until now, I use full English on WhatsApp, and when outside with mix the language. (S4,Int)

For speaking, just speak with friends, better if mix as long as keep use English. That’s what I did. (S4,Int)

“Because I don’t want to disturb lecturer. Some lecturers do not like to be disturbed outside class.” (S7_Int). Due to their high respect for teachers but they have low proficiency in English, they prefer to seek help from their friends more than their lecturers. This is echoed with what has been shared by S1, who claimed she was afraid to seek help from her lecturer.

Participant : First, I asked my friend.. Second I will search the internet.. Last is my lecturer..

Researcher : Why your lecturer is the last person you seek help from?

Participant : Because I am scared. (S1_Int)

Besides asking for help from their lecturers, the participants also sought help from their friends.

I meet my friends. I will see my friends with higher band than me. My friends. I asked my friend (S10_OR)

Our friends also help us to finish the exercise. So what makes me happy is we get helped and they also helped. They give full commitment and are supportive. So we get excited to do the exercise, unlike we do it on our own, and google the answer it makes me bored. We cannot focus for longer time. (FGD_GB)

First, I ask a lot of friends so that friends can help, and give opinions(S9_Int)

S5, S6 and S8 echoed this when they asked their friends who were proficient in English.

My roommates, most of them are good in English, they are band four students. They have to do research assignments for their course, and sometimes I asked about what words are suitable. (S6_Int)

My roommate is powerful (good) in English. I asked him too. (S8_Int)

My roommate is little bit more powerful in English. I also learned from him. (S5_Int)_

Out-of-class strategies

The followings are the out-of-class strategies used by the participants of this study. These strategies are reported by them in the interviews throughout the 14 weeks of the semester.

Translating

Due to their low proficiency in English, most of the participants translated to find a word/text equivalent in another language or to comprehend the meaning of the word/text. They translated Malay to English and vice versa, as well as Arabic to Malay language. In working on any assignments or completing tasks assigned to them for their English course, almost all of the participants reported doing the translation.

The participants did the translation to understand, therefore the translation is from English to Malay, as S3 has stated, *I jot down in my book and try to find the meaning in a dictionary because I tried my hard to find words. Google Translate. I very like it. I make it first. If I want, I will check with Google Translate. (S3, OR)*

Peer learning

This section will focus on discussions about the people of diverse backgrounds involved in the actions of learning English through the blended learning approach used by the participants. To reveal, S1 enlisted the guidance of her friends to help her with her grammar (S1, int). This example clearly shows that the activity of seeking help is to be corrected and that the support came from friends.

Keep using the language

The participants started to use the language frequently at the university. Unlike in their previous school, the use of the English language is minimal. Some admitted that they had never spoken the language before and had been a quiet student, but they had only begun to use the language at the university. This effort serves as a steppingstone for the participants to improve their language skills. Their efforts are highlighted in the following excerpts:

When I am in the university, I have to speak a lot, but when I was at school, it was ok if I was just silence. (S4, Int)

I speak English in class. When we have to ask our lecturer at the university, we have to speak in English, which I don't do before. (S2_Int)

S4 showed his tremendous efforts to use the language even he knew that he spoke broken language and mix it with Malay, but he kept on using the language not only in the English class but also outside. The reports on the efforts made by S4 are listed below:

I talk with my friends like normal people, talk mixed English and Malay, (S4,Int)

I keep speaking with each other without considering it whether I am in class or outside the class. (S4, Int)

keep communicate with them until now, (S4, Int)

just speak with friends, (S4, Int)

better if mixed as long as keep using English. That's what I did. (S4, Int)

keep using the language even a broken one (S4, Int)

always use the language, (S4, Int)

keep on using the language (S4_Int)

Watching movies

Almost all participants shared that they watched English movies regularly as a way to improve their English language.

I always watch movies. (S7_Int)

Watch English movie without subtitles. (S2_int)

S4 claimed that watching movies helped to widen their vocabulary knowledge, especially for beginners. *“watching movie because sometimes we get better vocab and it is good for beginner” (S4_int)*. Through the movie, the viewers may learn new words that they might never come across before or increase their vocabulary repertoire. This strategy suits the learners who have low proficiency in English. The movie that they watched outside the classroom, during their leisure time made them not only increase their interest but improve their vocabulary knowledge indirectly.

Li Ling (2009) states that the use of movies increase students' motivation, make the class more interesting, and familiarize the learners with the traditions of the target language. Movies expose students to language in real

life being used in authentic settings and cultural contexts which the foreign language is spoken. According to Kusumarasyati (2004), and Luo (2004), movies also catch the learners' interest and can increase their motivation to learn. Ward & Lepeintre (1996) further elaborate that movie can motivate EFL/ESL teaching and learning processes because movies provide a story that needs to be told rather than a lesson that needs to be taught.

The participants of this study reported that they watched English movies with subtitles.

Watched movie with the subtitles. (S3_Int)

I watch movie with subtitle. So I can read the subtitle while the actors read the script. (S6_Int)

Various studies have shown that subtitles or captions in movies have positive effects on English language learning. Rokni and Ataee (2014) suggest that using subtitles in movies, in general, affects language learning positively. While watching subtitled movies, students are not only watching and listening to the audiovisual material but also interacting with it as they translate the source text into the target language (Gorjian, 2014).

Online Language Learning Strategies

The participants of the study also utilized online strategies to perform the language tasks and learn the language. The followings are the strategies used by these 21st-century learners to learn the language in the online context:

Utilising tools

The participants used the online strategies via the tools around them. They utilized digital tools to perform the language tasks assigned to them or use the language in learning the English course. Figure 2 illustrates the digital tools used by the 21st century learners in a blended language class.

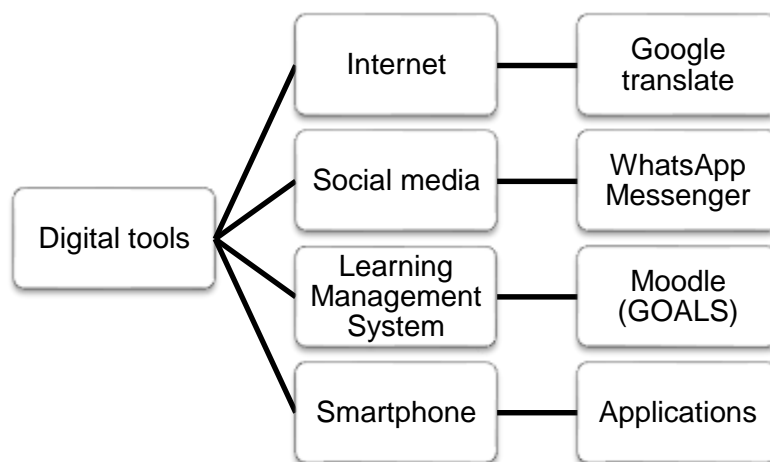


Figure 3 : Digital tools used by 21st-century learners in a blended language class

As 21st century learners, the participants utilize the digital tools around them to learn English. Internet, social media, Learning Management Systems (LMS) , and smartphones were all used by the participants. Figure 3 and the followings are the overview of tools that participants reported using to learn the language.

Internet

Since the internet is the fountain of all knowledge, the participants in this study took full advantage of it by browsing countless websites either to seek help and information or to look up meanings. Most of them surf the YouTube website in their effort to learn English. This is specified by S4 *"The ways that I use is keep watching movies, open Youtube see how people outside I mean overseas how they communicate with foreigner, to normalise not about speaking with good grammar, speak like normal person,...."*. (S4_Int) This is one of the efforts done by S4 to improve his communication skill in the target language. However, S5 went online to search for his Engineering research in

which he improves the language indirectly. *"I like to use the internet to my research in engineering.. I can learn English from it."*(S5_Int)

S1, on the other hand, makes use of the internet to learn the English language. This is evidenced by her frequent mention of her internet usage in the interviews.

i) But using internet to search for vocabulary to make an essay ii) because I search in internet... I learn a few new vocab. I improve my vocab.. iii) Second I will search the internet. (S1, int)

Another useful internet tool for translation is Google Translate. Almost every participant who took part in this study used Google Translate to help them learn the target language. Google Translate can translate Malay to English and vice versa. Participants admitted using it and as S10 mentioned, Google Translate is her favourite website that she referred the most.

Interviewer : Did you have a favourite website that you refer most?

S10 : Yes. Google translate (S10_int)

Similar to S10, S3 also like to use Google Translate. *I very like it. I make it first. If I want, I will check with google translate. (S3_int)*

Participants also reported using the search engine on the internet to look for information in order to complete the language task or assignment that had been assigned to them.

I search the topic in the internet and elaborate with my idea. (S10)

S1 used the internet to gather information in the same way that S10 did. *What I did was I looking an information such as the meaning of info graphic and also looking for how to do the info graphic with surfing the internet.... surfing an internet for looking an information about Penang Island such as the historical of Penang Island. (S1_OR)*

There is also a participant who made his own effort to learn English with the help of the internet. This indicates that this particular participant is an autonomous learner in learning the language. It can be shown in the following excerpt;

"I will do some practice.. and will write many essay from the internet. It makes me memorise many vocabulary in my bead. It is easy to do.. and I learn many vocabulary.." (S5_Int)

Social media

The 21st century has made the social network more evolving and as a must, especially to the millennials. There are much social networking gaining popularity. One of them is WhatsApp Messenger, which is an application used by many smartphone users as a means of communication. This can be seen by how the participants in this study used this social media tool widely to *help [them] connect with [their] lecturers and friends* (S1, S7). Furthermore, the interactive feature of WhatsApp Messenger benefited the participants as a platform to learn the language interestingly. *We also had played English game through WhatsApp. (S1, Int)*. Similar to S1, S11 also found using WhatsApp as a good platform especially via the group created for the English course, *[she] had fun with the activities that lecturer gave such as to find new words and many more. (S11, Int)*

Many participants showed their agreement on the advantage of WhatsApp Messenger since WhatsApp Messenger has various benefits for people especially for the students who they can easily get updates on the course. An interesting remark was made by S9 about the good feeling that he has with WhatsApp usage in the English course.

Whatsapp group was helpful, happy to get information from the lecturer in group. (S9_int)

Adding to that, S2 also reported that her lecturer used Whatsapp Messenger to give information when *[her] lecturer cannot come to the class, she gave the works on Whatsapp and we did it our own. (S2_Int)*

Participants shared positive feedback and their good feeling about using social media as they enjoyed the activities carried out in the WhatsApp group. S7, S11 and S12 highlighted the benefits of using the messenger to learn new words or vocabulary, as well as collaborative learning to complete the given task.

From the group WhatsApp , I had fun with the activities that lecturer gave such as to find new words and many more (S11,int)

I learn from activities. I learn cooperation between our student in group. For example work together vocabulary. (S12_int)

I got some news vocabulary and fun activities from the other friends (S7_int)

From the above extracts, they did not only emphasize their enjoyment of the lesson via WhatsApp group messenger, but also the improvement they have made, particularly in vocabulary knowledge. These findings concur with the findings of research by Ismail et al (2019), which revealed social media is a very practical and beneficial way to learn new things, gain knowledge, and improve one's language skills.

a. Learning Management System (LMS)

Almost all participants praised Learning Management System known as GOALS in this study for providing them with a new learning experience. GOALS stands for Global Open Access Learning System, is the Moodle platform through which the learners in this institution ease the learning management to both parties: lecturers and students. GOALS was used mainly by the lecturers to upload anything regarding the course like notes, course outlines and teaching materials, conduct online quizzes and post any updates or announcements. All of the participants were very positive about the use of GOALS in their language learning. S12 lauded it to be the "best website". S11 highlighted *many benefits that [she] had learn from the GOALS, which [she] can communicate with the lecturer and also with the student in GOALS ,[she] can see many different opinions from them.*

S9 expressed his positive feelings about GOALS, which he liked because of the availability of material he obtained from it. He said that;

I like because I obtained a lot of information – GOALS helps me a lot, lecturer gave many assignments via GOALS, and uploaded notes. (S9_Int)

According to the findings of this study, there are numerous advantages to using GOALS. The first advantage is that GOALS is used as a platform to share information, updates, and tasks assigned to students. S9 expressed his good feeling about GOALS which he liked because of the rich information that he obtained from it. He said that ;

I like because I obtained a lot of information – GOALS helped me a lot, lecturer gave many assignments via GOALS, and uploaded notes. S1 also added that she received [her] homework from [her] lecturer anywhere [she] go and [she] also can use GOALS anywhere as long have internet connection. Moreover, GOALS also help [her] to submit [her] assignment anytime. (S1_int)

One of the advantages of using GOALS to S11 in learning a language is that it allows her to study at her own pace. *From the activities that I most like in the GOALS is the online forum , from the online forum I can see the different of opinion between students and also give me some information. What I had learn from the GOALS is, it can give me many information and announcement and also to do work easily especially when to submit an assignment to the lecture . It's a platform for the lecturer and students to communicate easily. The GOALS is the way to improve my learning skills. (S11_OR)*

GOALS can also benefit participants by supporting peer learning. Through GOALS, participants can refer to their friends' works, learn from their friends, and get ideas from their friends. This is evidenced by interview excerpts;

Then, I can look at my friend's task was submitted, from that I can see and learn their grammar and can know their idea in GOALS. (S3_Int)

S1 highlighted her good learning experience where she learned the language consistently every week with the help of GOALS despite the class being cancelled.

I think GOALS sometimes help my lecturer pass any work if she or he cannot attend class. So every week we can learn English (S1_Int)

In a similar vein, S10 mentioned that her *Madam will give homework to replace the cancelled class. Means I must do the homework in GOALS for the attendance.* (S10_Int)

S6 also reported that she enjoyed her new learning experience in a way that it gave her a new mode and gave her access to submit her assignment. She also highlighted that the advantages of GOALS outweigh its disadvantage. She expressed this well by stating the benefits of GOALS in her language learning: “*before this (during school) [I] just submit on paper.. And teacher correct my paper too.. Whenever use in the website I feel much easier because I can write it and.. if it suddenly disappear I can copy it back but not like writing on paper. There's more advantage than disadvantage using GOALS.*”

GOALS can make my grammar better and it can improve my English.(S7_int)

b. Smartphone

As 21st century learners who engaged a lot with their smartphones, the participants of this study utilize their smartphone to learn the language. S10 for instance, used her smartphone to complete the language task assigned to her. “*I use application Picsart in my handphome. I prefer to use it because in Picsart have many beautiful and interesting sticker. It is very easy to complete my infographic task.*” While S1 specified the benefit of utilizing a smartphone, claiming that it allowed her to save her time.

Now, If I read my book, I only can search the meaning in my phone. It shorter my time. (S1_Int)

CONCLUSION

Overall, the experience of learning English via a blended approach was very fruitful and developmental. This research offers additional value because it not only ventures the experiences of these learners but also explores in depth the strategies that they used in both contexts (in class and out of class). In this regard, it offers considerable information in terms of what learners apply and use in the blended learning context. Their experience in asynchronous mode as well as factors to be considered in making the course a successful one.

The significance of this study is that the researcher brings fresh insights to current understandings at the core of the matter. That is, they illuminate the potential of LMS tools for informal learning strategies in pursuing this medium for ESL learning beyond the classroom. This study has strengthened the case for the significance of out-of-class ESL activities in terms of students’ perceived individual and social learning strategies. The research clearly identified that participants were purposefully adept at being good learners as they applied various strategies in seeking knowledge for the sake of their language learning. The combination of strategies employed by the 21st-century students is relevant to suit the various contexts they are in. It also shows that the three categories of learning strategies are interrelated with each other in assisting the students to learn the language.

Therefore, it is recommended that future studies be conducted to design and develop language digital tools to complement face-to-face learning inside the classroom. The tools are hoped to provide comprehensible paths for studying informal learning outside the classroom. This is to suit the language learning that needs to be done continuously and consistently by not only limited to during class hours or inside the classroom only. The development of these tools will extend the body of knowledge beyond what is learned in the formal learning process to include how people learn informally and how that learning contributes to ESL proficiency goals.

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