Active Blended Learning in the Teaching of Chinese as Foreign Language: Facing Pandemic Challenge

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Abstract

Active blended learning (ABL) is a pedagogical approach that incorporates sensory experiences with centred student interactions (with content, peers, and tutors) in the appropriate learning environments inside and outside the classroom. ABL focuses on engaging students in the creation, reflection, and criticism of knowledge, improving learners' autonomy and, of course, on achieving learning outcomes. The teaching of Chinese as a foreign language can be supported by using active blended learning. Various active blended learning methods can be utilised in supporting Mandarin learning inside and outside the classroom. The active blended learning methods include a personal blog, i-learn system, Facebook group, WhatsApp group, various self-developed systems etc. It provides self-directed learning experiences for the learners. However, the student's achievement is still unsatisfactory due to their limited competency in utilising online application (ABL). Of these, this study aims to study the student perception of ABL and the use of ABL. The result of this study shows that majority of students on some essential issues. A total of 31.8 per cent of students prefer to use online learning (ABL) to share/ access course materials (e.g., notes, slides, videos). Meanwhile, 68.2 per cent of students preferred to have regular classroom times for online learning. Also, we found that the institutional level is the most important use to support ABL among students. It followed by social level for communication, personal level and 4 additional levels were deemed the least useful to support ABL among students. Besides that, this study indicated a significant difference in using ABL based on four utilisation levels in supporting ABL. In conclusion, active blended learning should be structured to realise the promises that active blended learning can offer and avoid pitfalls along the way. It is important to put students' minds together, and their hearts will follow and build a sense of keenness in doing active blended learning together. The structure of levels shared could also provide the instructors with guidelines to ensure their 'best of active blends'. Thus, active blended learning should be encouraged in the active utilisation to teach Chinese as a foreign language and for all foreign language learning in general.

Keywords
Active Blended Learning, Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, students' level of utilisation and perception.

1. Introduction

The teaching of Chinese as a foreign language can be supported by using active blended learning. Various active blended learning methods can be utilised in supporting Mandarin learning inside and outside the classroom. Active blended learning is defined as a pedagogical approach that combines sense-making activities with focused student interactions (with content, peers and tutors) in appropriate learning settings – in and outside the classroom (The University of Northampton, 2020). However, active blended learning is not about putting all the links for the learners to access randomly. Proper scaffolding in ensuring the interactions between the learners with the learning materials, with their instructors, and peers is deemed essential. How this can be done is the focus of the chapter by sharing authentic experiences.

As defined above, active blended learning is defined as a learner-centred and interactions-based: a suitable balance between learner-tutor, learner-learner and learner-content interactions, face-to-face (University-based and outside) and online learning. The instructors need to understand the intentions of having those online activities that will lead to active blended learning. However it is as discussed by EDUCAUSE (2017) the key issues in teaching & learning is to make active blended learning meaningful, even though there are great endeavours to introduce active blended learning to engage students in learning especially when encounter crises in the face to face educational learning systems when face to face learning systems could not be offered due to major issues, i.e. health issues, virus crisis, etc. The problem is how to make active blended learning happens?. Active blended learning means the students take up their initiative in learning. In order to achieve it, proper guidelines should be able to give to the students in guiding them on what and how to learn actively.

Dringus and Seagull. (2015) have stressed the importance of having a sustaining blended learning initiative to enhance academic engagement of learners. It is vital to help the learners understand what they can do and how they can make the sustainability of active blended learning. Laying out the foundation and understanding is thus should not be ignored but must be conveyed clearly. As what have been discussed by Luna & Winters, (2017), students must be explained the why, how and what in doing active blended learning, only then it would ensure the success of the implementation of active blended learning. First-year students need to help them adapt to and engage in active blended learning models and explore online learning technologies in blended environments (Ellis & Bliuc, 2015). At the same time, professional development for active blended learning practice in a faculty to prepare and to equip the instructors on how to carry out active blended learning activities in their career path (Lim &Wang, 2016; Murthy, Iyer, & Warriem, 2015; Wicks, Craft, Mason, Gritter, & Bolding, 2015; Paskevicius & Bortolin, 2016). Simultaneously, institutional drivers and barriers to faculty adoption of active blended learning can be instilled and handled together (Porter & Graham, 2016; Safford & Stinton, 2016). These include the preparation of a personal blog, e-portfolio, etc. To showcase their personal teaching materials. It is because the intention is to implement active blended learning and a quality one (Lim, & Wang, 2016). It will only help in unleashing the creative potential of faculty to create active blended learning (Bohle Carbonell, Dailey-Hebert, & Gijselaers, 2013).

Additionally, making active blended learning occurs, interactions between the instructors, or among the peers, e.g., for peer e-tutoring (Sansone, Ligorio, & Buglass, 2016) media for communication must come in. Appropriate online activity is designed into the module, with the tutor visible and active. Some face-to-face contact time may be moved to the online environment, synchronously (real-time), and asynchronously (discussion forums, blogs, wikis, etc.). (The University of Northampton, 2020; Kim, Park, Yoon, & Jo, 2016; Thomas, West, & Borup, 2017). One of the purposes of having these interactions is to solve the problems, challenges, and issues before and during the implementation of active blended learning activities (Tuapawa, 2016). Communication using various social communication channels and platforms such as WhatsApp, SMS, Facebook messenger, Twitter (Thoms, & Eryilmaz, 2015) is necessary. Embedding social media in the academic curriculum as a learning and assessment strategy to enhance students active blended learning and e-professionalism should be encouraged (Megele, 2015). As discussed by Zhu, Au, & Yates, (2016), Broadbent (2017) and Van Laer & Elen, (2017), blended learner's self-regulated learning strategies, self-control and academic performance are highly associated. Therefore, interactions between the instructors and learners personally should not be neglected. It can be done by having effective communication channels whereby personal counselling, encouragement, guidance etc. can be offered. However, there is reflective statement claiming that: "Yes for sharing, no for teaching!" for the social media in academic practices (Manca, & Ranieri, 2016). Measuring the effectiveness of active blended learning environment in communication should be conducted (Wai, & Seng, 2015). Nevertheless, for low internet users, they will still prefer to use texting for active blended learning purpose.

Not to be forgotten, tracking the involvement of active blended learning is essential. Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, (2016) have mentioned tracking online education. Without knowing if the learners involve in the suggested and proposed learning activities is not acceptable and should not be termed as active blended learning. Ensuring

students' online participation in the virtual environment of blended learning activity would only be able to yield positive student performance (Cavanaugh, Hargis, & Mayberry, 2016; Cheng & Chau, 2016). Additionally, ample online activities, exercises, immediate feedback of online assessments, etc. Are provided in these kinds of systems. The use of these active blended learning activities has provided benefit for the students in developing their soft skills as class time provided more space for their exercises (Pisoni, Marchese, & Renouard, 2019).

As discussed by Arum, Roksa, & Cook (2016), the learning outcomes and assessments must be measured in improving the quality of education. All these can be done online by using an institutional system. On top of that, any non-institutional learning systems, including those open learning systems or commercial learning management systems, i.e. MOOC, can be utilised as well as long as there is a way of monitoring and assessments on learning (Konstan,Walker, Brooks, Brown, & Ekstrand, 2015) as learning management system is deemed to be a vehicle for active blended pedagogy (Kathryn, Green, Haynes & Chewning, 2020). It is also interesting to find out that students enjoyed active blended learning through online quizzes as they deemed that it's a better way of learning with instant learning outcomes feedback and a kind of less busywork (Cook & Babon,2017). It is a vital feature that a good active blended learning mode should not be missing. On top of that, online assessments can be conducted using this learning management system (Debuse & Lawley, 2016). The benefits and drawbacks of these online assessment and feedback systems from both the student and educator perspectives are worth noticing. Enhancing feedback in active blended learning and understanding students' attitudes towards online and in-class formative assessment feedback models in active blended learning are often vital (McCarthy, 2017) in active blended learning implementation.

Nevertheless, active blended learning involves providing all kinds of enriching online activities as well. Active blended learning focuses on promoting student autonomy and active learning. Students learn to learn in a blended context (The University of Northampton, 2020). It is students who decide the widths and depths of their learning. The role of the instructors is to show the route in generating a wider and deeper path for learning. As mentioned by Bloemer, & Swan, (2015) this way of informal blending learning is normally used by keen learners who want to learn wider and further that what classroom teaching can offer. The key is the activeness in learning. In sum, the active blended learning methods and activities can include personal blog, i-learn system, Facebook group, WhatsApp group, various self-developed systems etc. with the purpose to provide self-directed learning experiences for the learners. Active blended learning is used in accordance to the need of learners in supporting their learning. It can be structured as the framework showed below. The purpose is to share ideas on the design principles for the blend in active blended learning (Lai, Lam, & Lim, 2016) and a framework for active blended learning implementation for curriculum design and professional development (Mirriahi, Alonzo, & Fox, 2015).

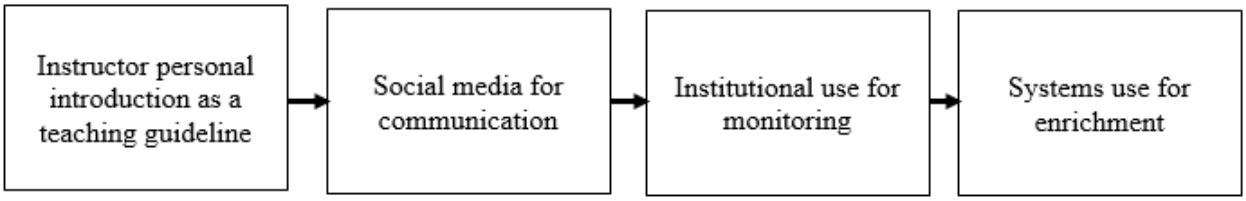


Figure 1. Active blended learning framework

The focus is to discuss the utilisation of four levels of active blended learning in supporting Chinese teaching as a foreign language. Supporting examples along with relevant links are provided. The findings of a survey are also presented to support the discussion.

1.1 Personal Level

In introducing active blended learning, it is good to begins with a personal blog. To ease the learners to look for the instructor's personal blog, it is better to point out to the students an easy way to remember how to search for the site. It is because normally students will not be able to remember the long name of a site. For example, asking students to search for: Goh Ying soon Google site (Figure 2). Students will be easier lead to the intended blog for a visit (https://sites.google.com/site/gohyi141/, see Figure 2 below). It is vital to have a self-introduction about the instructor as well as vital links that the students can visit. (i) Inform students a way to search for personal blog and (ii) Getting the personal blog.

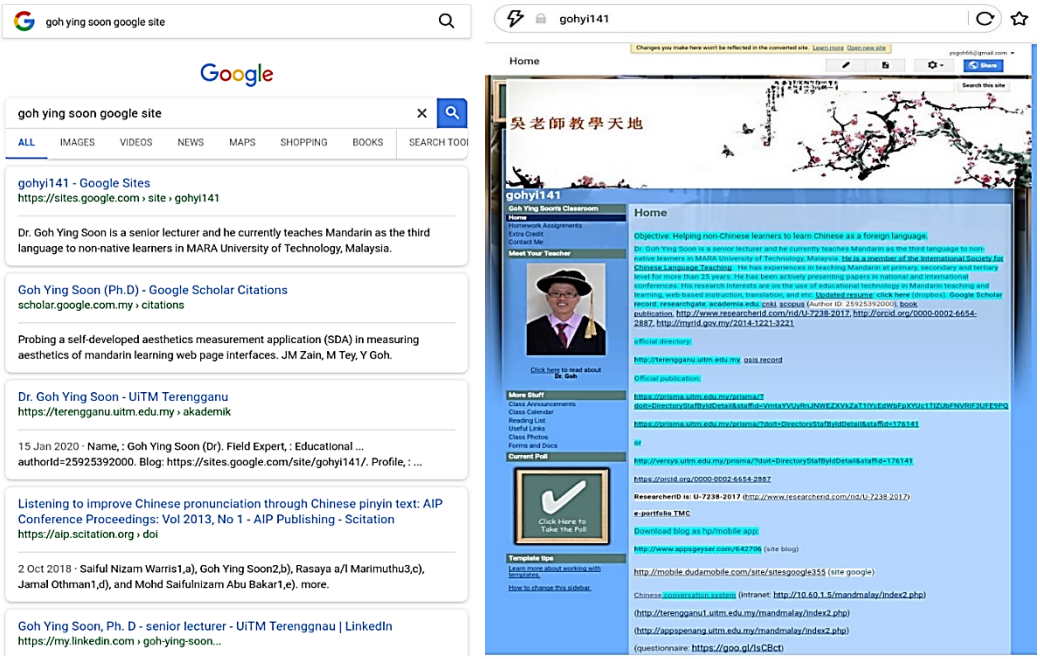


Figure 2: Screenshot of a Personal Blog

1.2 Level Of Social Media Communication

Social media for communication is vital for the second level of active blended learning. Instructors need to communicate with their students effectively. There are various methods of social communication. One way is by having Facebook group. At the beginning of the study, the instructors will have to inform their students to join the intended Facebook group which will be used in the semester, and the instructors have to make sure that the link of the Facebook is included in the personal blog for easy access (see figure below, for example Facebook group for tmc151, a Mandarin level 2 course, an intermediate Mandarin course offers to the non-native learners, https://mobile.facebook.com/groups/1861222407498347/?_rdc=1&_rdr).

The purposes of using Facebook include making the announcement and having interactions with the students. The reason for using Facebook is because the students always use Facebook for communication. Hence, the instructors may send reminder to the learner to get involved in learning activities that the instructors want their students to learn from the Facebook, get update, have Facebook instant messages with the learners, etc. (See Figure 3). Why sometimes Facebook is a good idea for use? It is because students incline to copy answers from the posts of their friends. Other methods should be utilised in order to ensure personal efforts coming from the learners. It is by sending personal instant messages. However, this way can be quite troublesome as the instructors will have to check the list of instant messages or to have too many instant messages. Therefore, the use of an institutional system can be handy, which will be discussed in detail in this chapter's next session.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Facebook activities (a) group link and (b) course information

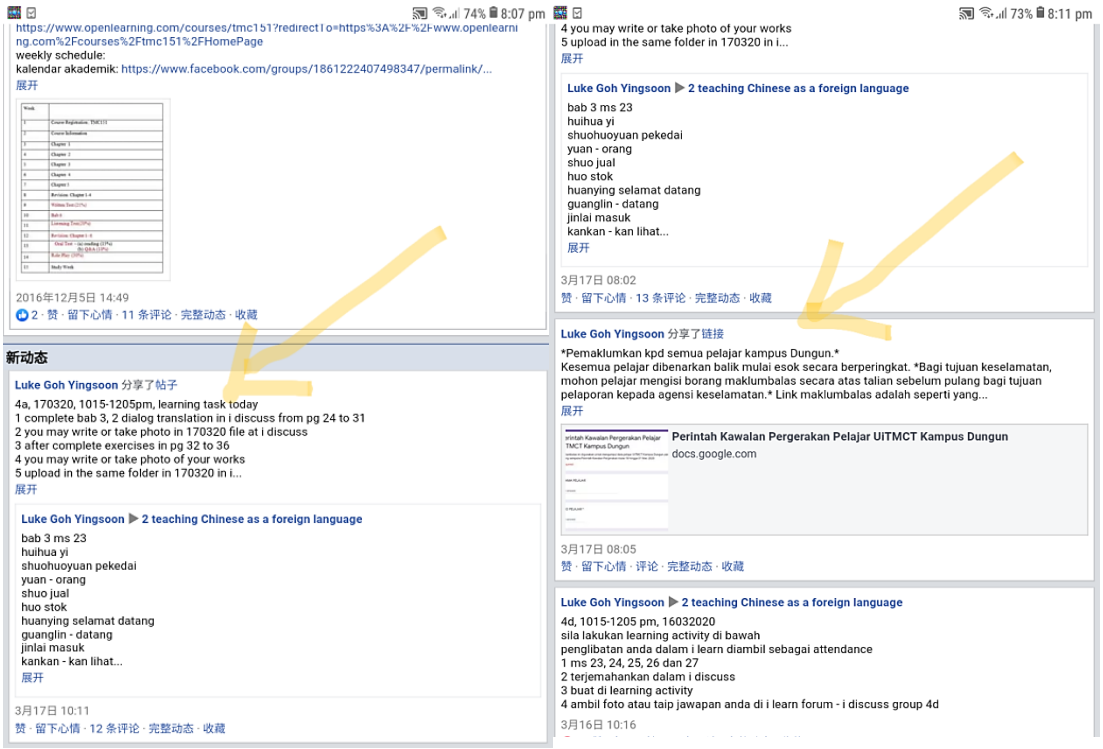


Figure 4. Screenshot of Facebook activities (a) learning tasks and (b) making announcements

On top of this, during this level, WhatsApp group and personal WhatsApp communication can be helpful. Why use WhatsApp? This is because students nowadays depend so much on WhatsApp for communication. Hence, WhatsApp can be utilised for personal reminder, getting instant response, giving direct feedback, rendering personal

consultation, showing personal encouragement, etc. (see Figure 5). However, why sometimes WhatsApp is not using and good for active blended learning entirely? This is because it is too difficult to organise all the information shared in the WhatsApp group, and a great bundle of messages will be messy for learners to refer later.

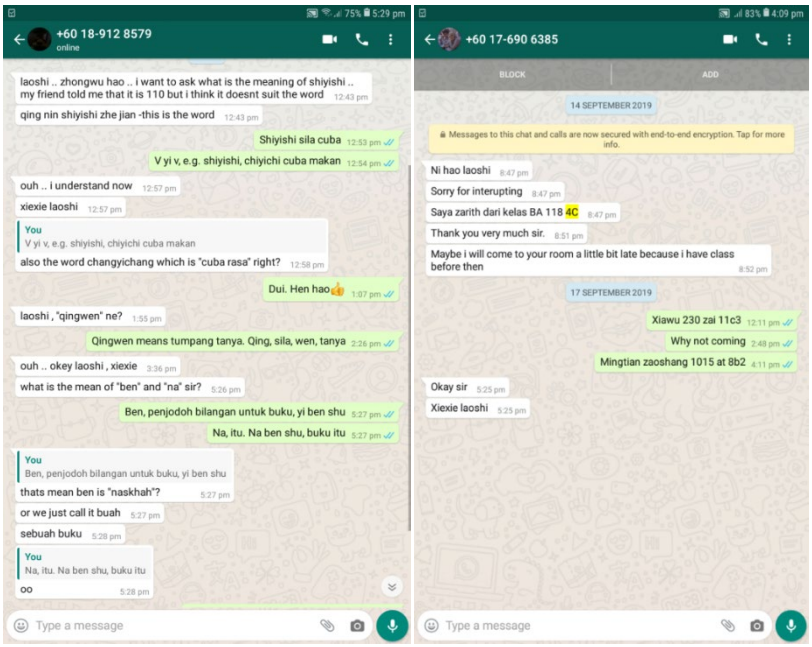


Figure 5: Screenshot of Whatsapp Messages (a) Giving Personal Consultation and (b) Giving Personal Reminder

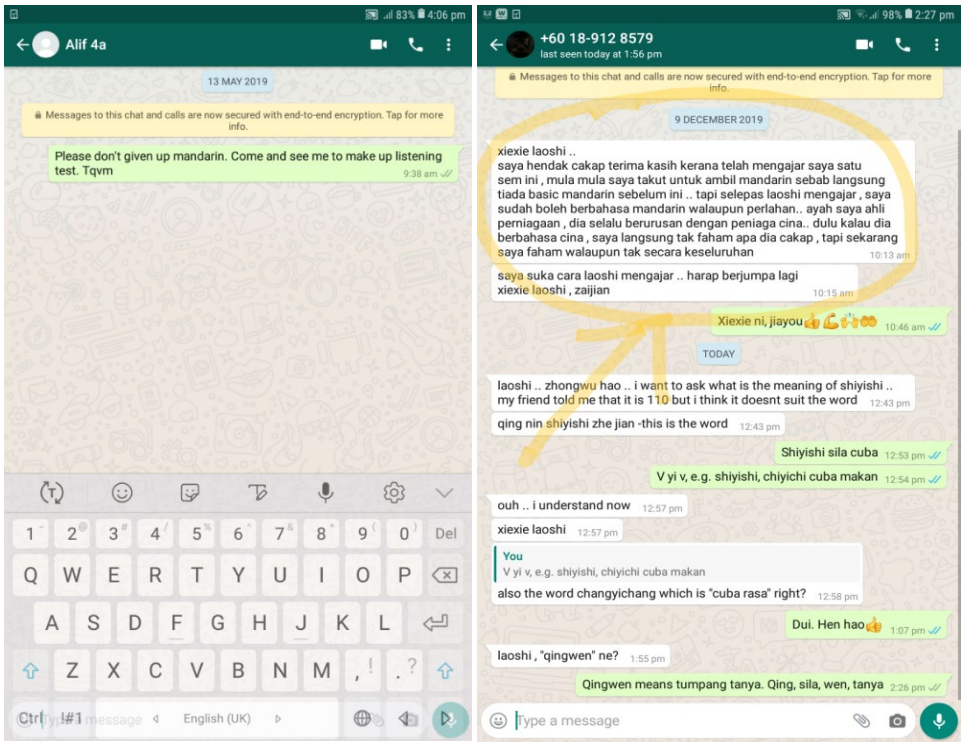


Figure 6. Screenshot of WhatsApp messages (a) Giving personal encouragement and (b) Expressing personal gratitude to the instructors

1.3 level of Institutional support

Once students ate used in doing active blended learning activities, instructors still need to have proper monitoring, tracking of students 'access and use, of learning material, so, traceability is very vital. This is the stage whereby institutional system can come in, i.e. i-learn system used at UiTM, Malaysia (https://i-learn.uitm.edu.my/v3). Students need to log in the system in ensuring learning accountability. The designs of online quizzes are to provide listening and writing skills development (Talib et al., 2019). The students will enjoy these kinds of learning activities as they are able to receive immediate feedback pertaining to their learning, assessments can also be done by using the institutional system (Ghazali et al., 2019). The instructors may easily get the records of students ' involvement as well as the reports on their achievements. Students may drop their assignment in the system without worrying on the issues of plagiarism by other learners. Additional learning activities, can also be provide, example the learning of Chinese idioms, etc.

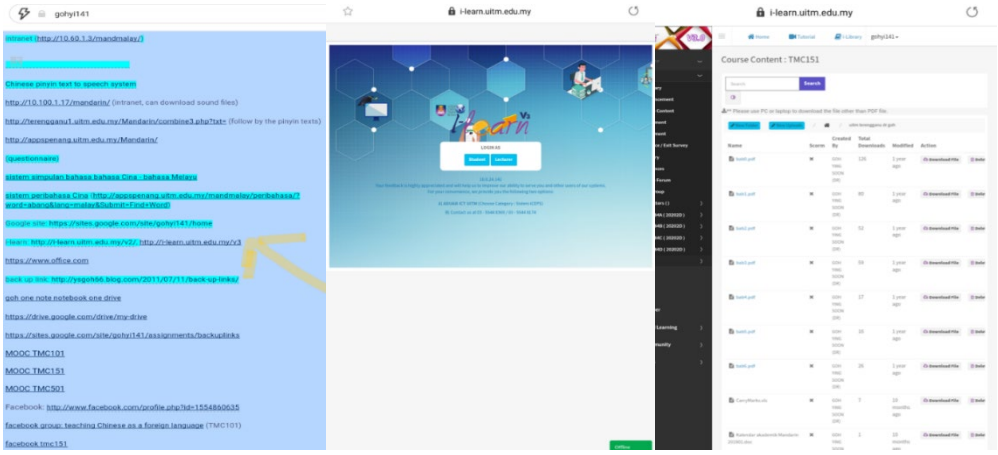


Figure 7. Screenshot of institutional system (a) link on the personal blog, (b) Log in the system, (c) Listing of course contents

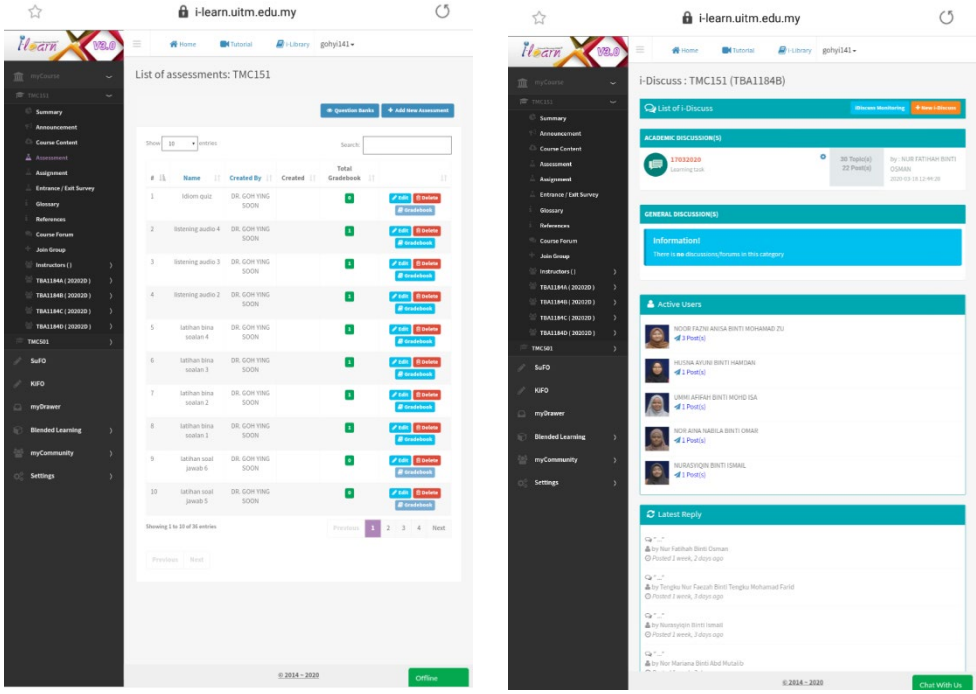


Figure 8. Screenshot of institutional system (a) Assessment, (b) students ' personal works in i-discuss in the institutional system

1.4 level of Additional Enriching Systems support

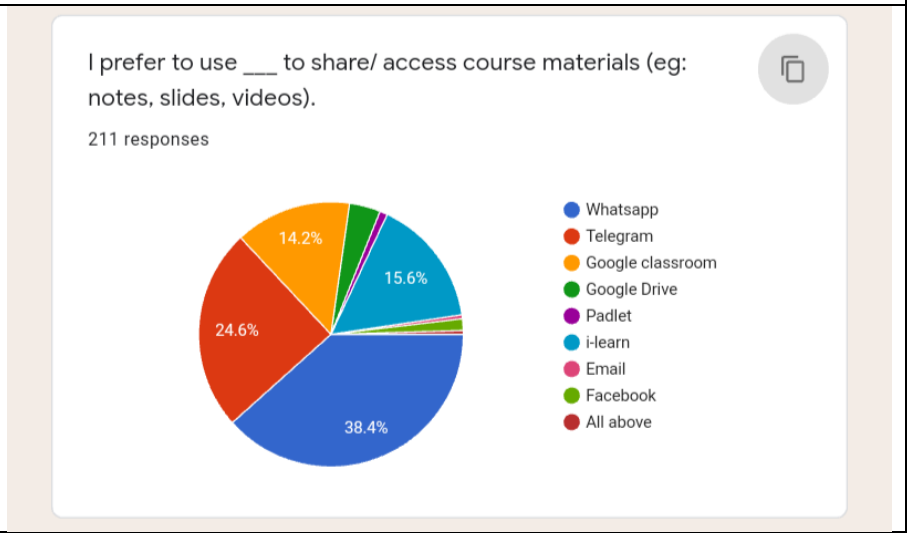
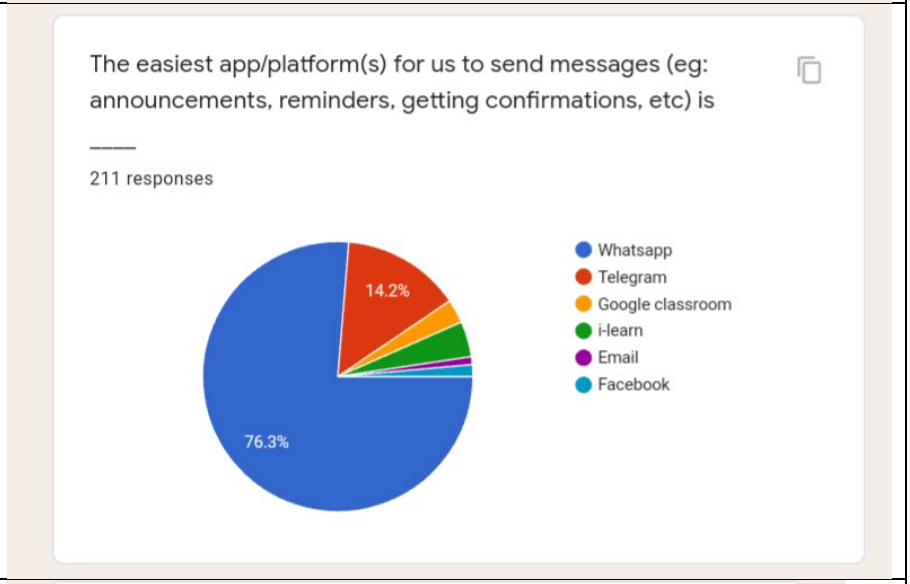
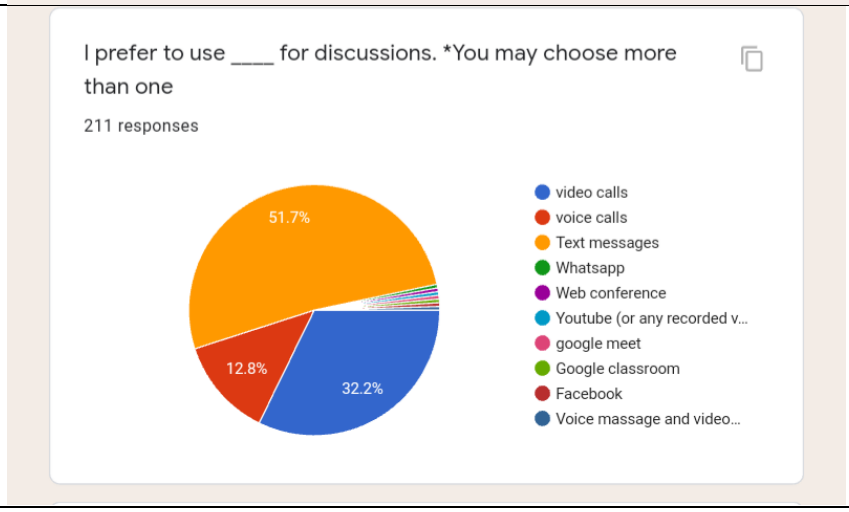
Active blended learning does not stop on the structured learning provided by the instructors. The instructors may prepare various links for additional learning to cater for keen learners. Some ideas are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Additional enriching systems

	Link	Purpose
Pinyin text to speech	http://appspenang.uitm.edu.my/Mandarin/	Using Chinese pinyin texts input to generate sound files
Chinese Malay online dictionary	http://appspenang.uitm.edu.my/mandmalay/?word=dungun&lang=malay&Submit=Find%20Word	Using Malay keywords to look for Chinese words
Chinese-English Conversation system	http://appspenang.uitm.edu.my/mandmalay/index2.php	Generating Chinese sentences using English keywords
Chinese idioms system	http://appspenang.uitm.edu.my/mandmalay/simpulan/?word=rajin&lang=malay&Submit=Find+Word	Using Malay keywords to look for Chinese idioms
Chinese proverbs system	http://appspenang.uitm.edu.my/mandmalay/peribahasa/?word=abang&lang=malay&Submit=Find+Word	Using Malay keywords to look for Chinese proverbs

2. Findings

A recent survey was done on students ' perceptions pertaining to active blended learning at UiTM Terengganu. Figure below showed the findings. There were 211 respondents to this survey. Discussions below reflected the majority views pertaining to some essential issues. 38.4% of the respondents prefer to use WhatsApp to share/ access course materials (e.g.: notes, slides, videos). 76.3% of the respondents viewed that the easiest app/platform(s) for us to send messages (e.g.: announcements, reminders, getting confirmations, etc.) is WhatsApp. 51.7% of the respondents prefer to use text messages for discussions. This was because they only have rather good internet connections (51.2%) even though texting is associated as a distraction to learning in college students (Dietz & Henrich, 2014). Additionally, 68.2% of respondents preferred to have regular classroom times for online learning. It showed that for active blended learning, students are in favor of disciplined learning time and not a unstructured manner of learning. It is also consistent with the findings of Tynan, Ryan, & Lamont-Mills, (2015) in examining workload models in online and blended teaching, in which students would not like to waste their time in doing blended learning with no designation of regular learning time. They generally dislike those time dragging and data consuming online activities. Most importantly these active blended learning activities should be able to contribute in enhancing academic performance. All these findings were also in line with the discussions above.

Vital aspects	Screenshots
Ways of access to learning materials	
Ways of making announcement	
Ways of making communication	

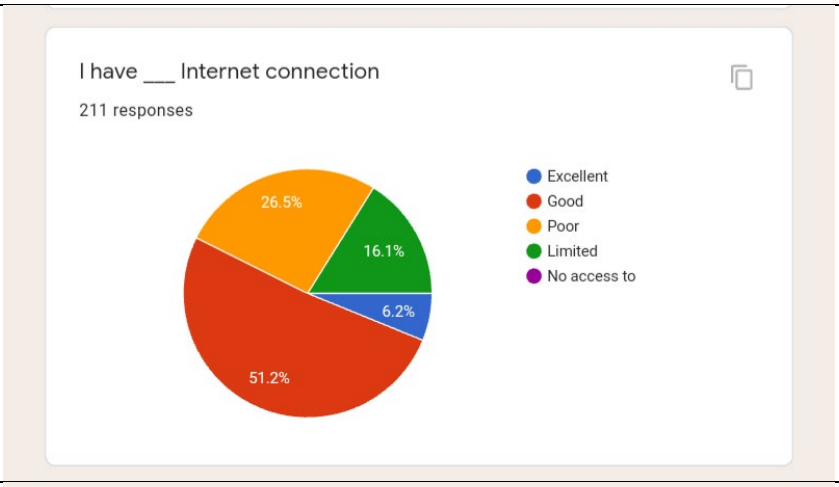
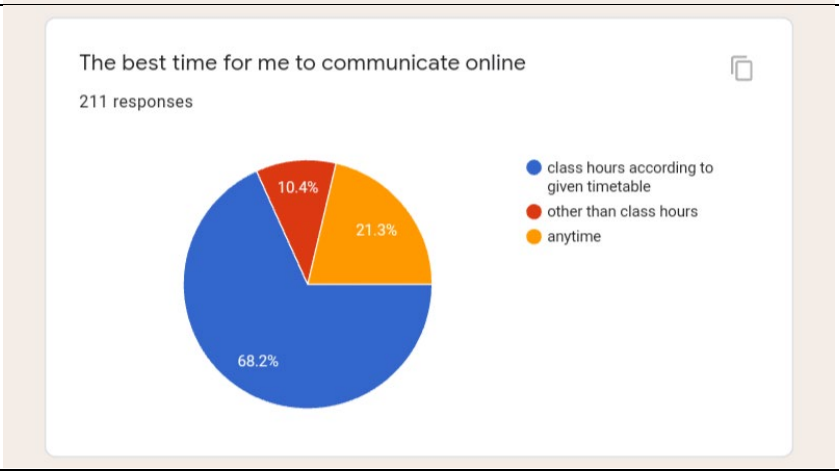
Internet connections	
Learning times	

Figure 9. The result of recent survey findings

3. Results and Discussion

Active blended learning is seamless learning. Seamless learning does not mean learning without directions and in random. Decent active blended learning provides guidance, and put learning in a structured and proper manner, in ensuring learning occurs. So, students should not be left alone with the active blended learning itself. Proper guidance must be given. In sum, Table 2 showed the summary of the discussion.

Table 2. Utilisation levels, examples and purposes

Utilisation level	Purpose	Example
Personal	Making self-introduction of instructors, Having compilation of related links for the course	Personal blog
Social communication level	Making communication Doing announcement Putting relevant learning links	Facebook group WhatsApp group
Institutional support	Making tracks of access Having assessments Having records Submission of students ' personal works	e-learn system

Additional supporting and enriching level	Making kinks for enrichment Allowing personal references	Instructors 'self-developed systems Existing online learning materials

It is important to aware that the proposed and discussed framework above does not indicate the time frame of how active blended learning should be implemented. It is only suggesting the sequence of active blended learning can be carried out. They can be carried out simultaneously at a lesson and repeatedly conducted in subsequent lessons. For example, during the third level of institutional system utilisation, when the instructors observed the negative students ' behaviour in the participation of online activities, the instructors might have to use the second level of communication channel in contacting the individual student in giving personal guidance and encouragement as discussed by Cigdam & Ozturk (2016). Hence the four levels are not stringently sequenced but might be flexibly going backward, forward, and in cyclical manner seeing the learning situation of the students. Experience shared here might not be suitable for the implementation of a large scale active blended learning program (Dion, Dalle, Renouard, Guseva, León, Marchese, Mutanen, Pina-Stranger, Pisoni, Stoycheva, et al., 2018) as well. It is always not possible to come out with suggestions that one size fits all. The effects of instructional conditions in predicting academic success with the implementation of active blended learning are unique and differing (Gašević, Dawson, Rogers, & Gasevic, 2016). However, the main ideas and principles are remaining the same. It is perhaps the standardisation of implementation.

Moreover, there might be existing learning management systems available that encompass the four levels of features in the market. The instructors can satisfy to structure their course contents, integrating users' highly preferred communication channels such as WhatsApp, carrying out typical learning management system function, and properly presenting enriching links. The question is the pricing of the available commercial services that the institution to which the instructors are attached is willing to pay. It is the financial aspect of adopting systemic active blended learning. Subscription to a commercial learning management system highly depending on the availability of budgeting. However, the improvement of existing institutional learning management systems that cater to the four levels or facets in delivering better active blended learning is a continuous and ongoing process.

Knowing if active blended learning is on the right track is showing a sincere attitude for the accountability of education. It helps to gain the confidence of the instructors, the students, the parents, as well as all relevant parties and key stakeholders that a proper active blended learning has been offered. The quality of education does not be slashed or lessened in the name of those "non-qualified " passive blended learning. It should not be surprising that much of what we have called blended learning is blended teaching that reflects pedagogical arrangements (Dziuban, Graham, Moskal, et al. (2018). How the instructors make good arrangements of blended learning, and emerging technologies to support the learning will produce good and decent active blended learning. Another aspect in which this chapter does not cover and indeed an important issue of active blended learning is making active blended learning also work for poorer grades students and in harder courses (Anderson, Goss, Inglis, Kaplan, Samarbakhsh, & Toffanin, 2017). Access and perceived ICT usability among students with disabilities in active blended learning must be attended as well (Heiman, Fichten, Olenik-Shemesh, Keshet, & Jorgensen, 2017). Further studies need to explore these areas in making a fairer active blended learning environment. Besides, studies on the e-readiness, e-satisfaction, and expectations on implementing active blended learning should be continuous efforts (Ilgaz, & Gülbahar, 2015; Ibrahim et al., 2019) for improvement and betterment.

4. Conclusion

As summarised, active blended learning is a pedagogical approach that combines sense-making activities with focused student interactions (with content, peers and tutors) in appropriate learning settings – in and outside the classroom (The University of Northampton, 2020). Active blended learning should be structured to realise the promises that active blended learning can offer and avoid pitfalls along the way. It is important to put students' minds together, and their hearts will follow and build a sense of keenness in doing active blended learning together. The structure of levels shared could also provide the instructors with guidelines to ensure their 'best of active blends'. Thus, active blended learning should be encouraged in active utilisation to teach Chinese as a foreign language and for all foreign language learning in general.

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