Experiences of Blended Learning in Libyan Higher Education

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Abstract

This study highlights the experiences of a group of Libyan university teachers introduced to the concept of blended learning. To provide professional development and update the teaching skills and knowledge of the teachers, a course was designed to combine digital and classroom learning. The programme ran for six weeks and involved 20 English language teachers from across different faculties of the university. It was delivered in English.

The digital contribution was enhanced by Prezi presentations, shared folders and live online delivery by teacher trainers in the UK. This was supported by a trainer in the classroom, who provided activities that reinforced the learning. It was an interactive programme and all the teachers were required to deliver a short lesson that was critically evaluated by their peers.

This paper reflects on the experiences of these teachers and their perceptions of a blended learning programme that involves international input through the contribution of digital technology. A survey of the teachers revealed high satisfaction rates and suggested ways in which similar programmes could improve both skills and knowledge of Libyan university teachers in the future.

Keywords: Blended learning; professional development; international standards; evaluation; teacher training

1. Introduction

In order to upskill the teachers at Zawia University and introduce concepts of international teacher training, it was decided to run a programme that would benefit them in providing professional development. This programme needed to be able to merge both familiar and unfamiliar approaches in the delivery. It was therefore decided to use a blended learning approach, whereby the participants would be supported in a familiar classroom environment and benefit from digital learning at the same time. Participants would be taught new skills both face-to-face in Libya and via Skype from the UK. This would enable teachers to extend their knowledge base and apply that knowledge so they could be in a position to update their teaching practices and use with their

own students. It would also introduce an international dimension to the programme that would not otherwise be able to happen, given the restrictions on travel for international visitors.

Libyan teachers in Higher Education have had few opportunities of continuing professional development, evaluating other teachers, and reflecting on their own practice. However, these are all important aspects of teacher training that are associated with quality of teaching and are familiar to international teachers. By involving teacher educators from a specialist teacher training organisation in the UK, the Libyan university teachers would be able to benefit from the latest strategies and ideas available to teachers in the UK education sector. This was important in terms of Libyans being able to teach their own students in ways that would enable those students to compete in a global environment in the future.

However, in Libya there are traditions of teaching that are not easily overcome and some reluctance to accept innovative teaching practices was to be expected. The introduction of teacher educators from another country made it easier to introduce new concepts as the Libyan teachers would be more ready to accept novel approaches from someone outside the Libyan establishment. At the same time it was important to have a teacher educator in the classroom to direct the programme and provide the motivation and stimulus required.

This paper reflects the experiences of a group of twenty university teachers who attended a programme at Zawia University for six weeks in December 2019 and January 2020. They all came from English departments across the different faculties of the university. It was important that they had good English skills as the programme was being delivered in English and the teacher educators from MKLC, the teacher training company in the UK, were all presenting in English.

The classroom delivery was enhanced by the use of technology, including Prezi presentations to make the course more interactive and interesting for the participants. These presentations were also used as a demonstration of how the delivery of materials could engage learners and become a focal point in the learning process; in other words, the university teachers on the course could learn from their own experience and discover new ways of presenting their materials to their students in the classroom. The course was not only for the university teachers to absorb new knowledge but also to show them how to apply the new techniques they were experiencing.

Furthermore, the university teachers were engaged in learning activities to reinforce the knowledge they had absorbed

through the presentation of materials. They were being shown in practice ways to introduce inclusive learning strategies to ensure all learners had an equal opportunity of achievement. This is important as students do not all have the same level of understanding of a topic and yet they are often taught on one dimension. Consequently many students fail to understand concepts that would enable them to construct learning and build on what they know.

Assessment of learners is essential to ensure understanding takes place and progression occurs. On this course the university teachers were involved in activities that entailed initial assessment, formative assessment and finally summative assessment. Initial assessment is a check on current understanding of concepts, formative assessment monitors understanding of what has just been taught and summative assessment checks that there is full understanding and the concept can be put into practice.

For this programme the summative assessment was the presentation of a short lesson that was then evaluated by the university teacher's peers and assessed by the classroom teacher educator. This delivery of a lesson encapsulated all the learning that had taken place over the past few weeks and ensured that the university teachers were able to deliver a lesson that was in line with the quality standards expected at international level.

2. Literature Review

Within this paper there are three themes that are being explored in connection with the programme that was delivered: these are professional development, new approaches to teaching and the use of technology. Each of these themes is evaluated in terms of existing literature. It can be seen that there is often an overlap between all three themes: new approaches to learning and the use of technology can be enhanced through professional development. Furthermore, it can also be ascertained that deficiencies in the teachers' skills required for applying digital learning can have a significant impact on the ability to integrate technology into classroom activities.

2.1 Professional Development

Professional development for teachers is a requirement in the UK, where teachers are expected to log a certain number of hours each year of relevant Continuing Professional Development (CPD). This is to ensure they have updated their skills and knowledge on a regular basis and can retain their qualified teacher status. Professional development can be both

formal and informal and is invaluable in extending understanding of new principles and practices, although many teachers tend to relate such updating of skills simply to attendance on courses. However, professional development can also take place naturally in the workplace.

Professional development provides a support arm to people in a changing environment. Webb (2019) reveals that 40% of millennials who do not receive on the job training to become more effective in the workplace are likely to leave their job within one year. This may not be dissatisfaction with their role but is likely to be more linked to a sense of uncertainty about whether they are progressing and learning about how to improve. It affects older generations as much as millennials (Webb, 2019), as rapid developments in technology can sometimes seem overwhelming. In an education environment, teachers can develop their skills and knowledge within the workplace but it requires a system to be in place to ensure all teachers benefit. This could entail regular meetings with senior staff or observations of other teachers and of being observed by peers.

Teachers are often reluctant to take on professional development activities as they may feel overloaded with teaching responsibilities and have commitments that do not allow them to take time out of the classroom. To this effect, Leach et al (2004) recommended computer-supported teacher training where there could be more flexibility. However, this can also create challenges as many teachers do not see the value of training that may not have relevance to them and consequently do not rate the effectiveness of online technology (Scott, 2008). It may take strong measures to get teachers to accept the need to develop their skills; this is why Ismail, Kinchin and Edwards (2016) suggested that Egyptian teachers should log a specified number of professional development hours to maintain the level of their salary: if teachers do not develop their practice, then they cannot be considered worth as much as teachers who do keep up-to-date with current practices. Although this may not be possible to carry out such salary restrictions, the threat alone may ensure that teachers remain focused on the importance of professional development.

One of the issues highlighted in recent research has been the deficiency in teachers being provided with professional development on designing quality and interactive online learning programmes (Archambault et al, 2016). The pandemic has shown that this would have been relevant and timely, yet many institutions have until now offered no support at all in providing teachers experiences or understanding of using different approaches and modalities.

Trust and Whalen (in Hartshorne et al, 2020) argue that a lack of preparation and training in teacher education has led to extra stress and barriers to providing effective online learning when needed. Teachers have not generally been provided with opportunities for participating in online and blended learning and teaching (Christensen & Alexander in Hartshorne et al, 2020), which with the rapid advances in technology should have been fundamental to their development as professionals.

2.2   New approaches to teaching

The concept behind this programme was to introduce a mixed approach to professional development. It was important to include teacher educators from the UK for Libyans to benefit fully from international teaching approaches. This could only be conducted by utilising video conferencing through Skype, which enabled direct contact with the UK. It meant that a blended learning approach was integral to the success of the programme. A study by Alebaikan (2010) conducted in Saudi Arabia found that blended learning enhanced the quality of learning; it introduces new elements into the programme that benefits both teachers and students.

Blended learning is used to describe a teaching approach that uses several different ways of delivering a programme. It can be a mixture of face-to-face classrooms, e-learning and self-study. Each of these blended learning methods of delivery can be categorised into three models, which Valiathan (2002) explains are suited to specific situations:

Model	Purpose	Action
Skill-Driven	Teaching that requires feedback from tutor	Classroom or live online
Attitude-Driven	Peer interaction	Group discussions
Competency-Driven	Transfer of tacit knowledge	Observation

Table 1: Blended learning models. Source Valiathan (2002)

For the skill-driven model, a mixture of technology and non-technology methods can be used and can be interchangeable. Presentation of material can be in a classroom or by webinar and feedback face-to-face or by email. There must be interaction with the instructor to achieve outcomes (Valiathan, 2002). The attitude-driven still requires input from the tutor but requires more interaction with peers through group discussions: these can be in a classroom or in an online forum. Finally, the competency-driven model thrives on observation and interaction with others; observing and discussing can be facilitated using a mixture of live observations or videos that can then be evaluated.

For many university teachers, the concept of using mixed modalities is contrary to their experiences of traditional teaching approaches. They are therefore uncomfortable in experimenting with new approaches that may not meet with approval from students or their parents. Although such approaches have been shown to improve quality (Alebaikan, 2010), Naaj, Nachouki and Ankit's (2012) study conducted in the UAE found that student satisfaction was the most important factor in determining that quality. Therefore, it is essential that students are confronted with a new approach that is presented confidently and competently by their teacher. This means that the teachers must be trained in ways that allow them to use different approaches and integrate them seamlessly so that students enjoy their learning experience. Unless teachers have themselves understood different modalities and approaches, they cannot incorporate these into their own teaching practices. Indeed the best way for teachers to understand is to be involved in a course that utilises a blended learning approach successfully. Once they have applied the knowledge, they will be in a position to better appreciate the concept.

Teacher education needs to incorporate new approaches and diverse settings to give teachers confidence they can meet the challenges of a rapidly changing education environment. The way in which teachers select pedagogy tends to depend on the way they were themselves taught (Lortie, 2002) but, if they have been supported by strong professional infrastructures, they are more likely to select more appropriate and relevant approaches (Jensen et al, 2015). This reinforces the need for professional development involving the use of technology and how it can be used both in and outside the classroom.

2.3   Use of technology

As mentioned previously, professional development can be difficult for teachers who are constrained by time and also by the limitations within their own institutions. There may not be systems in place that can ensure all teachers are given opportunities for enhancing their skills and knowledge. Yet there are still ways in which teachers can update their practice and ensure it is relevant to their needs. Technology provides opportunities for accessing knowledge.

With the global COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions have had to move to remote learning but many have not been well prepared for such a move (Hodges et al, 2020). Online learning can be a rewarding experience but, as Holmes, Signer & MacLeod (2010) argue, it needs to include both social interactions and the presence of a teacher. Face-to-face interactions in real time can in many ways replicate the classroom within a technology-enriched learning environment

(Little & Housand, 2011). However, online learning cannot simply transfer the classroom programme to an online format (Gagne et al, 2005), as it requires a focus on specific attributes. Unfortunately, the pandemic has served to highlight the inadequacies of education institutions to accommodate successful online teaching programmes.

The lack of preparation for teachers to design and deliver effective online teaching and learning during the pandemic has meant that many teachers have been left unsupported. In many cases teachers have resorted to finding their own resources and guidance on how to deliver a course in a medium unfamiliar to them; this in turn has caused much stress that could have been avoided by ensuring all professional development was both relevant to the teachers involved but also to the environmental context within which students are locating knowledge. One of these ways has been through video (Cavanaugh & DeWeese in Hartshorne et al, 2020), where teachers had to search platforms such as YouTube to inform themselves. The teachers had thus become students in their search for information and this may be a positive sign for the future, if teachers realise the immense online resources that are available to them and their own students.

For some years there have been calls to prepare teachers for online and blended learning approaches (Ferdig & Kennedy, 2014), but it has not been implemented into teacher training establishments or educational institutions (Kennedy & Ferdig, 2018). Teacher training institutions have a role to play in ensuring teachers can use technology but they do not provide strategies for integrating technology into classroom activities and therefore the teachers do not have the competencies to use technology to best effect: Tondeur et al (2016) found that few teachers used technology in flexible and diverse ways in the classroom. Teachers may have the knowledge of technology but they often do not have the skills to apply that knowledge (Lee & Lee, 2014).

3. Methodology

Participants were recruited from the English Language Departments at Zawia University and had to commit to training twice a week over a period of six weeks. As the programme was being delivered in English, it was important that participants had a good working knowledge of the language. They were also expected to self-study in order to enhance their understanding. The times of the classes were run in coordination with UK times and to match the availability of the UK presenters from MKLC.

A total of twenty participants enrolled on the programme. They attended for two hours on Mondays and Wednesdays and followed a structured programme which had been designed according to UK requirements. Presentations were provided by the classroom tutor and by UK teacher trainers via Skype. Learning activities were overseen by the classroom tutor, who coordinated the programme.

Participants were able to watch lessons being taught in the UK and also observe their peers in the classroom. All participants had to deliver a short teaching session, incorporating the new ideas they had taken on board during the programme. Six of the participants were randomly selected to be interviewed on their experience and these interviews were recorded in English. The recordings were then transcribed for ease of analysis. All interviewees were advised that their privacy would be respected and these interviews were solely for the purpose of research on their feedback in order to make improvements and recommendations for future courses.

A further questionnaire was later sent to all twenty teachers asking them to evaluate the course after they had had time to reflect on the programme.

The methodology for the programme was based on the blended learning approach and was designed using Valiathan's (2002) models as a framework. Presentation of the materials was provided both in the classroom and by video conferencing. Activities to reinforce learning were classroom-based and timely feedback was given by the instructor. Group discussions were facilitated and observations of teaching were conducted both using live teaching sessions online from the UK and classroom teaching sessions involving peer observation. This mix of methods provided the university teachers with an interactive experience of blended learning. The teachers were interviewed about their experiences of being involved in a blended learning professional development programme.

3.1 Data Analysis

The interviews of the university teachers required a qualitative approach, which meant that interviewees were asked open questions that required descriptive responses and data was analysed using thematic analysis. The main themes covered new knowledge, the value of such programmes, and effectiveness of the course. These themes were then coded to the themes found in the literature: in most cases the value of such programmes was linked to professional development; new knowledge was associated with use of technology; and effectiveness of the course was aligned with new approaches to teaching. Findings could then be presented in a narrative

format. However, a follow-up survey of the teachers using a quantitative approach enabled a statistical analysis.

4   Findings from Interviews

The value of such professional development programmes was clear from the interviews with the Libyan university teachers. Interviewee A said:

> *'The training programme has added to me a lot, especially the assessment part, how we can do a presentation in a professional way, and a lot of things I learned from our colleagues. I learned a lot of things, especially the videos and how I can see them from a different perspective.'(A)*

Interviewee A has specified the areas where she felt she gained the most benefit. There are three separate elements she has focused on: one is learning how she can improve her classroom practice using presentations and videos; a second is learning something new about assessing students; and the third is that she can also learn from communication and interaction with her colleagues.

Meanwhile interviewee B appreciated the practical aspect of the programme as she felt that teachers may have the knowledge but they do not always have the ability to apply it.

> *'I think it's really important for most of the teachers. Even though most of the teachers have the knowledge to teach, they really lack the abilities to communicate with students. They are kind of stuck on using just one kind of method of teaching, the traditional way of teaching.'(B)*

Professional development can show teachers how they can improve their practice and, as interviewee B says, communicate with their students. Good communication with students will motivate teachers to try new ways of teaching instead of depending on the traditional ways, which may be seen as old-fashioned by young people who are used to technology.

Four out of the six interviewees concurred the most beneficial aspect for them was the opportunity of learning about new teaching methods. They felt they would now be able to incorporate some of these methods into their own classroom teaching. Interviewee F detailed what they had gained from the course and felt this had changed the way English could now be taught.

> *'The course has the level of teaching methods, teaching methodologies, teaching structure for the course, how people learn English, how to make them*

enjoy the class, how to manage the timings of the lessons – we have learnt all these from this course. It has really changed my teaching to enhance and add more to my strategies for teaching English courses.'
(F)

Professional development courses are designed to be relevant to the needs of participants and help them improve their practice. Interviewee F has told of how the course has enabled them to consider new strategies, which will indeed help improve practice in the classroom. Learning new approaches to teaching has also been welcomed by interviewee D:

'It was a big chance to have this programme with MKLC and Dr Mohamed; I think I have enriched my teaching experience and I have learned new things in training, assessment and I have added a lot of ideas.'
(D)

All interviewees felt they had gained from the training and there was clearly a desire to have more such courses in future as part of a professional development scheme. Interviewee C explained what had been learnt from the course:

'It was very important – I have learned a lot such as teaching methods, how to do assessment and giving feedback to my trainees. Also we learned to do a lesson plan, how to do a microteach for the team. In fact it was very, very, very useful. We added information to our previous knowledge. We need to develop more this side, especially the training and the assessment, which is very important. I need to learn more about microteaching and assessment but we have learned much, new ideas.'(C)

It is clear that the interviewees felt they had learnt new things, which is the aim of professional development. Interviewee E benefited from '*sharing experiences with other people, especially when I did my presentation*'. This indicates that interviewee E was open to having his teaching sessions observed by others so he could improve and develop his practice. In addition it also shows that the critical feedback he received from his peers was constructive and consequently valued. There is therefore much to commend collaboration with colleagues.

'Training is the best way to improve yourself and will improve our education system all over Libya. We need to develop such courses in our colleges and universities and try to apply the learning to real life.'
(A)

The opportunity to apply the knowledge they had learnt during the course was valued by interviewee A. During the programme the learners had been presented with practical ways of delivering structured lessons that would motivate and engage learners. They were then required to apply that knowledge by delivering a short microteach session so they could put their learning into practice. Interviewee A now understands the importance of application of theory.

Interviewee B enjoyed the opportunity to link online with the UK but she noted: '*The internet connection affected the delivery of some of the lectures.*' This demonstrates the importance of ensuring there is a good internet connection if a successful blended learning course involving online interaction is to be achieved. There is a desire to continue using the internet as a way of learning about other cultures and how they teach their students, as interviewee C explains:

> '*It shows that it is possible to do such courses in Libya that we can learn from what they do abroad. It would be good to do this with other students in other countries so we learn about new cultures, meet people and understand different points of view. I do hope we go ahead to continue with microteaching sessions.*' (C)

Interviewee D gained from the programme and would like to have more such programmes included in the university offerings for teachers as she felt it would improve the quality of teaching. Assessment was an element that all the interviewees wanted to know more about and indicates that more professional development could focus on assessment to ensure students progressed.

> '*These programmes should be added to the offering of the university and we should take more programmes like assessment and quality assurance.*' (D)

The challenge would be to find times to suit the availability of teachers. This is always an issue when teachers have limited time available. It is a problem that all busy teacher have and one recognised in the literature by Leach et al (2004). Interviewee E noted that:

> '*To set up a course you need to know the times the teachers are available. This is difficult when everyone is busy and we need to find the right time. Timing is the main issue with us.*' (E)

However, as Leach et al (2004) acknowledged, technology could be used to mitigate this by offering digital solutions to support any face-to-face delivery. There is always the possibility of offering asynchronous presentations, where a

recorded presentation could be viewed. This would still enable the social interaction that Holmes, Signer and MacLeod (2010) recommend and learners could work through at their own pace and in their own time. It could be further supported by an email link if the learners wanted to ask questions or for giving feedback.

Overall the university teachers attending this programme believed they had gained from the way in which the course was delivered and would welcome more professional development that would enable them to learn and practise what they had learnt, as interviewee F said:

> *'We need more time for practising by doing. I wish we could have more of these courses for our staff in this university.' (F)*

4.1 Survey Results

Twenty results were received from the survey conducted after the programme had been completed. The respondents were 85% female and 15% male.
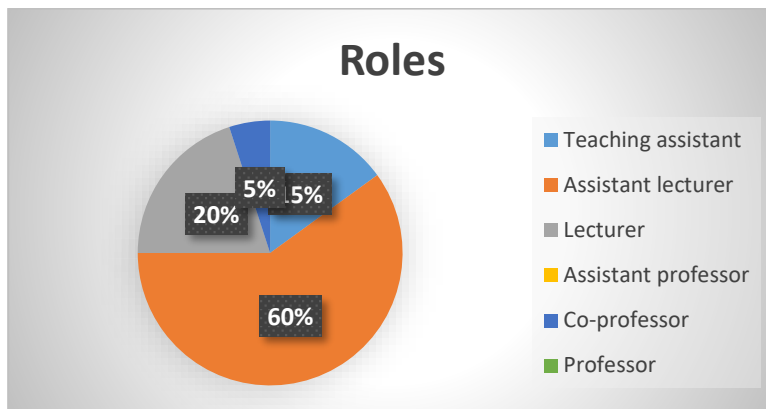
There was a range of ages with the majority (65%) falling into the 31 to 40 bracket. Fifteen percent were between 20 and 30, while twenty percent were aged 41 to 50.
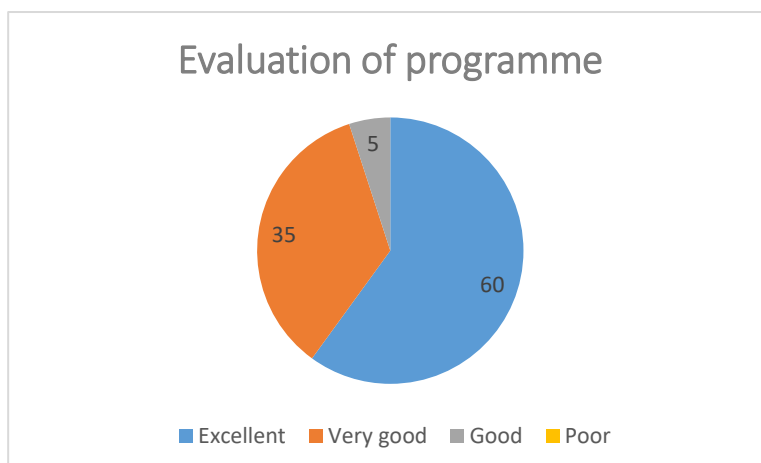
There was a high satisfaction rate with the programme, indicating the quality, according to Naaj, Nachouki and Ankit (2012), who specified that quality courses can be measured by the level of satisfaction feedback from learners.

Comments from the survey:

I would like more training courses like this

It was very nice to go through this experience

A more suitable time could be chosen to suit teachers

The course material was excellent and suitable for all trainees, greatly benefiting from the lectures

A very distinct and excellent course that was effective and the duration of the course was suitable for everyone

The course was excellent and I benefited greatly from it

It would be good to continue with such courses

The course is professional and I hope such courses will continue

It was all new information for me

5. Recommendations

Professional development is part of the learning journey that all teachers should undertake in order to keep their practice updated. Recommendations, based on the experiences of these university teachers, are:

- Enable opportunities for teachers to observe each other conducting a lesson, even if this is a short microteach session
- Encourage collaboration and group meetings to discuss teaching approaches
- Find opportunities for teachers to collaborate online and gain from international experiences
- Arrange regular professional development training sessions and make available to all teachers
- Set up a system for teachers to log their professional development activities
- Consider making a set number of hours of professional development activities mandatory for all teachers
- Ensure a good internet connection
- Use webinars and recorded video conferencing to support teachers who may miss face-to-face sessions

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