

Blended Learning as the New Norm: Neophyte Language Teachers' Attitude and Perceptions in Focus

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the attitudes and perceptions of neophytes teachers gives educational institutions relevant measures on how their teachers could adjust and succeed, especially during the time of the pandemic. This study aimed to explore and decipher the neophyte language teachers' experiences in adapting blended learning to the new normal. To obtain this purpose, the researcher used the qualitative-hermeneutic phenomenological method. Fifteen neophyte language teachers who handled Filipino, English, and Mother-Tongue were purposively chosen. Focus group discussions were conducted to obtain pertinent information for the study. Thematic analysis revealed five themes: apprehension of the implementation of blended learning, adaptation to the new situation, perception of flexible learning, the complication of flexible learning, and formation of values. It revealed that most neophyte language teachers were initially perplexed at the onset and slowly accepted their new situation. Despite the challenges, they saw silver-lining. One of their biggest struggles was the module submission by the students. They were optimistic that sooner or later the situation will calm down. The whole experiences of the neophyte language teachers had similarities with the researchers. The findings gave a good realization that academic institutions need to make foresight of the future so that they are prepared for unexpected events.

Keywords: Attitudes, Blended Learning, New Norm, Neophyte Language Teachers, Perceptions, SPAMAST.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Albeit the unstable situations brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, educators remain steadfast on their call to teaching; however, this time using the blended-learning approach. Despite the acceptability of this approach, many researchers found its disadvantages. Shimizu *et al.* (2019) said that in a blended learning approach, students rarely discuss their tasks actively and are not sufficiently engaged in self-directed learning. Tashiro and Hebeler (2019) mentioned that many of the learners at home are not ready for blended learning due to the lack of support. Likewise, blended learning is greatly dependent on internet connection and time (Aladwan *et al.*, 2018); infrastructure (Fitri & Zahari, 2019); technology (Kocour, 2019); technical resources and equipment (Rao, 2019); and self-regulation of using technology (Rasheed *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the drawbacks of blended learning, several authors presented its advantages. Sul *et al.* (2021) opined that blended learning is an effective customized approach to address the COVID-19 situation. Moreover, Szadziewska and Kujawski (2017) averred that blended learning is good support to the traditional teaching process. Consequently,

since blended learning allows flexible time, learners develop independent study skills (Shang & Liu, 2018); facilitates self-understanding and enhances problem-solving activities (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Simarmata *et al.*, 2018); does not depend on teachers' lectures (Suana *et al.*, 2017); and leads to the improvement of learners' communicative and critical thinking skills (Sul *et al.*, 2021); enhances motivation to experience a new language (Abliladi & Alshareef, 2019; Tawil, 2018). Likewise, it allows students to have higher learning outcomes (Eliyashi *et al.*, 2019).

With the implementation of the blended learning approach, teachers' perceptions and attitudes were seen as relevant components. In the study of Hensley (2020), he summarized the elementary teachers' perceptions of blended learning as an instructional methodology for meeting the needs of diverse learners: knowledge and understanding of effective instructional practices, enhancing instruction with the strategic use of technology, personalizing learning, technology-enabled assessments to support instruction, engaging and empowering learners, and relevant professional development and support. In another study conducted by Katzin (2020), he found that elementary teachers did not have a common definition of blended learning and that teachers believed that blended learning

was deemed ineffective. Interestingly, An *et al.* (2021) found a link between teaching experience and specialization with readiness to distance learning education. This was especially observed among the newly hired teachers. The researcher assumed that due to inexperience in teaching, neophyte teachers had difficulty adjusting to the new normal situation. Nevertheless, the new teachers were willing to learn and adapt to the current condition.

On the other hand, Turner *et al.* (2018) found that elementary teachers' attitudes toward the benefits of blended learning significantly differed by grade level, especially when it came to instructional technique. It was also revealed that the more the teachers became aware of the benefits of blended learning, the more they expanded their use of it for instructional delivery. Relatively, Chien (2022) found that the socioeconomic status of teachers had a significant impact on their attitudes toward blended learning.

During the first quarter of the school year 2019-2020, newly hired teachers were put to test in preparing educational materials for students (Remerosa *et al.*, 2022); they were given more workloads than in the face-to-face setup (Marek *et al.*, 2021); they needed to change their teaching methods alongside lowering students' expected tasks (Johnson *et al.*, 2020); and they needed to spend more than four hours a day (Klapproth *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, Munoz *et al.* (2021) found those neophyte teachers were not familiar with online education, as well as distance and hybrid learning. Hence, Rodriguez (2021) concluded that neophytes' online teaching is related to the number of years they spent as teachers.

The Department of Education, Division of Digos City, had implemented the blended learning approach since the opening of classes in October 2020. Cahapay (2021) said that in the Department of Education's Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BELCP), classes are ordered to conduct classes through the combinations of print-modular, television-radio, and synchronous and asynchronous. San Jose *et al.*, (2021) observed that despite the additional challenges of teachers in the basic education such as becoming collators and assessors of modules and receivers of parents' complaints on erroneous materials, few researchers had a dig into the neophyte teachers' attitudes and perceptions on the implementation of blended learning. The bulk of the research was focused on students' perceptions of blended learning, an example was of Ifinedo *et al.* (2018); Kurt and Yildirim (2018); Owston *et al.*, 2019; Sari and Wahyudin (2019); Taufiqurrochman *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2021. Besides all these studies dwelt into higher education. It is on this ground that this study emanated. The researcher believed that documenting the attitudes and perceptions of neophyte teachers in the basic education department can help the Department of Education officials formulate relevant policies to address the needs of newly hired teachers and therefore improve the implementation of the blended learning approach.

A. Statement of the Problem

The main purpose of this qualitative-phenomenological study was to explore and decipher the neophyte language teachers' experiences in adapting blended learning to the

new normal. Particularly, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What were the attitudes of the neophyte language teachers in adapting the blended learning approach to teaching the students the new normal?
2. What were the perceptions of the neophyte language teachers in adapting the blended learning approach to teaching the students in the new normal?
3. What challenges did the neophyte language teachers encountered in adapting the blended learning approach to the new normal?
4. How do neophyte language teachers address the difficulties they experienced in adopting the blended learning approach in the new normal?
5. What significant lessons the neophyte language teachers could share with others in adopting the blended learning approach in the new normal?

B. Theoretical Lens

This study was anchored on the Experiential Learning Theory developed by Kolb (2014). This theory contended that the main source of learning and development is direct experience (Kwon, 2019). In the context of blended learning, neophyte teachers would have the opportunity to engage freely with technological tools and resources; hence gaining experience (Hiasat, 2018). Through blended-experiential learning, according to Maier and Thomas (2013), a stronger acquisition of real-life scenarios is learned.

Experiential Learning Theory is appropriate in this study because it was assumed that neophyte elementary teachers could better understand the blended learning approach through their real encounters with the situation. The preparations they had made, the overloads they carried out, the challenges they experienced, and the coping mechanisms they developed, were part of the reality which allowed them to decipher their role as teachers using blended learning amid COVID-19.

With hermeneutic phenomenology which was the method used in this study, it explained what were the lived experiences of the participants and how the researcher would give meaning and reflection to those experiences on her own. Owen (2008) and Zahavi (2015) mentioned that hermeneutic phenomenology required conscious evidence of the experience and these experiences according to Chabrak (2005) allowed understanding to be constructed. Hence, the researchers needed to gather that experiential evidence from the participants before they could their interpretations of their experiences.

C. Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study only involved selected neophyte elementary language teachers from public and private schools in Digos City, Davao del Sur. Moreover, this study focused only on blended learning and the participants' attitudes and perceptions. Likewise, this study used hermeneutic phenomenology which focused on looking at and considering each participant's experiences in blended learning while at the same time reflecting on the researchers' experiences. This study did measure the participants' satisfaction with the implementation of blended learning. With the limited number of participants, the findings of this study could not generalize the whole elementary language teachers' experiences of Digos City.

The findings of this study may only be true for those who participated in the study.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study utilized hermeneutic phenomenology. As a method, qualitative is used if the investigator wants to explore an individual's perspective on the phenomenon (Rust *et al.*, 2017); decipher the whys and the hows of the experience; shed light on the essence of the participants' encounter with the phenomenon (Christensen *et al.*, 2017; Pereira, 2012); and determine concepts from new and fresh perspectives (Lin *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, van Manen (1990) mentioned that hermeneutic phenomenology inquires about and reflects on what constitutes the nature of lived experiences. While Goble and Yin (2014) opined that hermeneutics brings light to an individual upon their encounter with the phenomenon. In other words, in hermeneutic phenomenology, the researchers aim to find the relationship between the participants and the phenomenon while mirroring their link to the participants and the phenomenon. This implies that the researchers look into the veracity of their lived experiences of the phenomenon based on the lived experiences of others.

B. Sampling Design and Technique

The elementary novice language teacher participants were selected using the purposive sample approach. Purposive sampling is also known as 'subjective sampling' or 'judgemental sampling' (Etikan & Babetope, 2019). This means that the participants were chosen depending on the researchers' criteria. Purposive sampling, according to Campbell *et al.* (2020), increases the study's rigor and the dependability of the data and outcomes by better matching the sample to the research's goals and objectives. This implies that the participants were picked by the researchers because they were thought to be the best individuals to provide important information on the topic at hand.

C. Research Participants

The 15 participants are chosen based on the following inclusion criteria: have been teaching grades 1-6; handling either Filipino, English, or Mother Tongue-Based subjects; teaching in public and private schools in Digos City, and have been teaching for five years or less. Conversely, gender is not part of the criteria.

D. Research Instrument

The researcher used a researcher-made interview guide based on the research questions. In this study, the interview guide questions have five main questions and probe questions. Moreover, the interview guide will be given to expert validators for internal validity. To address this internal validity, the researcher makes sure that formulated questions were not biased and stick to the objectives of the study. However, the structured interview guide will not be subjected to external validity since the study has limited participants and cannot generalize the results of the findings.

E. Data Gathering Procedures

Before the formal conduct of the study, the researchers asked permission from the Division Supervisors, Principals, and participants of the study. Asking for consent from these individuals was necessary to comply with the ethics in the conduct of research. It was mentioned by Melnyk and Fineout-Overholt (2002); Medina and San Jose (2020) that asking permission is an essential step in evidence-based practice research. Likewise, Howes (2011) pointed out that obtaining permission is part of the protocol that every social science and humanities scholar must follow. Therefore, the researchers believed that it was inevitable for any investigator to obtain permission not only to comply with the ethical standards but also to cement the reliability and veracity of the gathered information.

After the permissions from the different individuals were obtained, the researchers crafted the research proposal. According to Ononiwu (2017), a research proposal allows researchers to structure their thoughts on how the study should be conducted. Also, Longmire-Avital (2019) opined that a research proposal is useful for developing the researchers' research writing skills. Additionally, it was at this stage that the research instrument was validated by individuals who were experts in qualitative research.

After the researcher-made interview-guide questions were validated, the researcher proceeded to conduct online interviews through google meet. The researcher decided to use the online platform in the gathering of information to comply with the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) guidelines. Albeit this, the researcher followed the ethics in the conduct of the interviews. Protocols were strictly followed by explained to the participants. To safeguard the reliability of the information, the research conducted focus groups at different times and days.

After the conduct of the focus group interviews, the researcher transcribed the recorded information. After the transcriptions, the researcher gave back the transcribed information to the participants for self-verification. It was done for the participants to make amendments, expunge, or review their answers. After the self-verification of the participants, the researcher forwarded the self-verified transcriptions to the data analyst for thematic analysis.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presented in Table I are the results of the data analysis conducted. In the presentation, the frequency responses are considered as *General* if a theme obtains 50% occurrence and above; *Typical* if the theme occurs 21%-49%; and *Variant* if the theme occurs less than 20%.

TABLE I: THEMES AND CORE IDEAS ON BLENDED LEARNING: NEOPHYTE LANGUAGE TEACHERS' ATTITUDE AND PERCEPTIONS

Theme	Core Ideas	Frequency of Response
Apprehension of the implementation	having confusion about how to deal with	General
	flexible learning, negative apprehension, hard to accept change, having no choice	Variant
Adaptation to the new situation	adjusting to the situation, thinking for the student, unlocking personal skills	Typical
		Variant
Perceptions of flexible learning	considering the pandemic as an opportunity, fitting to the new situation, expecting the guidance of the mentors	Typical
		Variant
Complication of flexible learning	lost or late submission of modules, unstable internet connection, academic dishonesty	General
		Typical
		Variant
Formation of Values	adapting to the change, becoming patient, becoming flexible, asking for help from mentors, becoming open minded, continue learning	General
		Typical
		Variant

Source: Data Analysis of the information gathered from the participants

A. Apprehensive of Implementation

Most new teachers admitted that they were initially perplexed as to how they would deal with the new circumstance using the flexible learning approach. The flexible learning approach was new to them and they had not used it ever since in their teaching. Few of them were so concerned because they lacked experience in the online classes and Learning Management System (LMS). Others confessed that they were accustomed to the old-fashioned face-to-face approach and that they had fear of embracing the changes in the new way of delivering the lessons. Few others entertained the fatalistic beliefs because they were put into a situation where they had no choice. Hence, they were forced to do teaching as ordered by the higher-ups.

The above findings corroborate with the previous studies which found that the COVID-19 has put teachers in limbo and tested their sense of independence and competence (Kim *et al.*, 2020); the COVID 19 has placed the teachers into an uncertainty which cause them to get frustrated (Chater, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020); and COVID 19 brings great psychological reactions to the teachers (Truzoli *et al.* 2021).

During my neophyte years in my teaching career, the new change I experienced at that time was the implementation of the English-only policy in the classroom. I found it awkward for someone like me who had a specialization in Filipino to interact with children who had little knowledge of the English language. Students were not used to conversing in English rather in they preferred to interact using their mother tongue. If ever I interact with my students in English, they would rather be silent than reply. Hence, I needed to strategize and found alternative solutions to the situation.

Unlike today, English has become a popular language for most students. Comparing the neophyte teachers of today with my experiences during my earlier years in teaching, there was a bit of similarity. First, there was a feeling of uncertainty and no choice. As teachers, we were caught in the middle and all we need to do is to adapt to the new situation and enrich ourselves with whatever we had. In some sense, our patience was tested.

B. Adaptation to the New Situation

After some time of experiencing the implementation of the flexible approach, the neophyte language teachers slowly accepted the new situation. They are slowly accustomed to the new approach. Some of the participants revealed they had already adjusted. They realized further that as teachers, they needed to do their jobs because of their commitment to their student's future. Positively, a few participants said that because of the new situation they were able to discover some of their hidden talents and skills. They discovered that they had spatial skills and manipulative skills in using online gadgets.

These findings coincide with the Experiential Learning Theory founded by Kolb (2014) which proposed that the main source of learning and development is direct experience (Kwon, 2019). As mentioned, the finding is also in congruence with Hiasat (2018) who said those neophyte teachers would have the opportunity to engage freely with technological tools and resources as a result, they gained experience. Moreover, Maier and Thomas (2013) pointed out that through blended-experiential learning, a sturdy acquisition of real-life scenarios is learned.

When I was a neophyte teacher, I also realized that I have to adjust to the situation. Through my diligence, I also discovered my talent for making visual aids. I have to produce pictures realistic and colorful pictures. I have to go through nature myself to get stuff for learners to see and learn the language quickly and easily. Comparing myself to other neophytes at the time, I would say I have done better for I have discovered bringing visual aids way earlier than the others. Since then, I have inculcated in my heart the importance of visuals for better understanding which has become part of my further studies.

C. Perceptions of Flexible Learning

Despite the challenges encountered by the neophyte teachers, they saw a silver lining in their situation as time passed. Typically, they pointed out that with the blended learning approach, they were able to develop their skills in online teaching, manipulating the computers, multi-tasking skills, etc., hence, they considered the new situation as an opportunity. Moreover, few participants mentioned that they were expecting the assistance of their mentors whom they

could rely on whenever they were in doubt about what they were doing.

The above findings reverberate Limaye's *et al.* (2020) earlier findings which mention that the increasing use of social media during the pandemic has favorably changed the attitude of teachers in online learning. Even before COVID-19, Kormos and Nijakowsk (2017) had already found that teachers' frequent use of online learning changed their attitudes positively. Hence, Anasi (2018) and Lin *et al.* (2013) posited that there is a positive relationship between attitude toward social media use and frequency of use towards teaching and learning.

As a teacher from the 90s, everyone knows that it is hard to learn modern ways, especially the trend of technology. However, that did not hinder me from learning and understanding how the internet works. I am super proud to call myself one of the online teachers that were fearless in taking that step to become a sophisticated teacher even someone being brought up by the old ways. As a modern teacher, I agree with the improved learning experience for the students as flexible learning is more experiential and community-based learning. However, there are also quite a few that needs enhancing for we know that a flexible learning strategy allows the student to decipher when and how they are going to learn. At times, they tend to develop bad habits towards their studies, some become very dependent on help. Though this is happening, there are also who showed a positive response.

D. Complication on Flexible Learning

Most of the participants revealed that the biggest challenge they encountered was the students' submission of the modules. They said that many students lost their modules or students submitted the modules late which affected their checking, recording, and reporting. This implies that students had become disinterested to learn because they had not given their studies an appropriate amount of time.

Typically, some teachers mentioned that the unstable internet connection hampered their conduct of online classes; hence, they resorted to a synchronous approach. This finding echoes previous studies which revealed that blended learning greatly relies on internet connectivity (Aladwan *et al.*, 2018); the availability of internet infrastructure (Fitri & Zahari, 2019); the presence of technology (Kocour, 2019); and technical and equipment (Rao, 2019). It implies that the location where the teachers and students are located lacks advanced technology and equipment.

Few of the participants observed that some students' modules were answered by somebody else and not by the students. San Jose (2022) mentioned that the change in the educational scenario from traditional face-to-face to online learning modalities has threatened academic integrity. San Jose (2021) also said during the COVID-19 pandemic cheating, copying, surrogacy, collusion, and other forms of dishonesty have increased. Burgason *et al.* (2019) also found that online cheating has increased as the gap between students and a physical classroom setting increases.

Just like the neophyte teachers, it was my first time experiencing flexible learning. Hence, I also considered my

new approach. We experienced the same challenges. However, at my age, nobody would expect that I could learn fast just like a neophyte. For me, accepting the challenges was hard; however, I was already a seasoned teacher and I could apply those experiences I had. I became used to the adversaries of teaching and used to use alternative mechanisms to address the problem.

E. Formation of Values

Generally, all participants admitted that they experienced challenges in one way or the other; however, they were optimistic that sooner or later the situation will calm down. With the new normal, they were willing to adapt and live with the changes.

Some of the participants mentioned that they needed to develop patience in dealing with teaching. Few others said that they needed to become flexible, and open-minded, continue learning new things, and ask for the guidance of their mentors.

In my 28 years of teaching, I would say I had already developed almost all kinds of values which included resilience, flexibility, adaptability, open-mindedness, acceptance, optimism, patience, and never say die. These values allowed me to survive in my profession. Moreover, these values gave me the strength to remain tough despite the various challenges. I believed those problems I had will also be developed by the neophyte teachers as they continue with their teaching profession.

IV. CONCLUSION

The apprehension among the neophyte language teachers at the onset of the new normal is a natural reaction to change. It implies that neophyte teachers are not ready for the new situation and needed guidance from their mentors.

Adaptation and adjustment to work happen after the teachers are exposed to the new situation. Their usual old teaching practices are changed by the new normal norms of teaching. At the onset, they discover some of their skills. This implies that change is difficult to accept at first and it takes time fully embrace the new situation.

It is evident that the neophyte language teachers, later on, realize that the new normal has become an opportunity for them to showcase their teaching skills; however, they also consider that the guidance of their mentors is essential. This implies that even if the neophyte teachers can develop confidence in their skills, they still need assistance.

The late submission or lost modules of the students implies that they are not serious with their studies. Hence, teachers need to build a concrete connection with their parents or guardians. This can be done through regular home visitation. Moreover, the unstable internet connection which affects teachers' online classes implies the lack of technological support of the school. Likewise, surrogacy needs to be addressed by letting the students and parents sign the pledge of honesty which can be developed by the teachers or by the school.

Despite the challenges encountered by the neophyte language in their teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, their spirit remains high, and they are optimistic that everything will go back to normal. This shows that neophyte

teachers transcendently look at the future of their profession and not at the troubles of the past. Hence, they are willing to adapt to the new normal. This indicates that neophyte teachers are open to change. Admittedly, neophyte teachers lack patience, open-mindedness, and flexibility, thus, they look for the guidance of their mentors. This is a positive indication that these neophyte teachers are honest about their needs and ready to learn more.

V. IMPLICATIONS

Being a neophyte teacher during a pandemic is an experience worth remembering. The pandemic has taught me many realizations. First is the readiness of the Philippine educational system for a pandemic like COVID-19. Internet infrastructure remains to be the biggest problem in the implementation of flexible learning. Hence, academic institutions may invest in this area. Second is the readiness of the teachers to adapt to the new normal. The blended approach is not new but it is not used by academic institutions during the old normal because students are not used to independent learning and teachers prefer the traditional face-to-face set-up. Academic institutions' administration may consider formulating policies that may intensify blended learning. Third, is the realization of thinking for the future. The pandemic opens everyone's eyes to the uncertainty of situations. Hence, thinking about the future may somehow address what is about to come.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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