Discerning F2F Success in Blended Learning for Teacher Development with Activity Theory

Lakshmi Kala Prakash
Mae Fah Luang University
Thailand
lakshmi.kal@mfu.ac.th

Annisa Laura Maretha
Mae Fah Luang University
Thailand
annisa.mar@mfu.ac.th

Abstract

A recurring complaint about the failure of professional development workshops in Asian ELT usually occurs as a result of ignoring the teacher's voice. Therefore, the chief aim of this study was to minimize this increasing divide by providing an opportunity to be heard. One hundred and thirty four High School teacher participants, while attending a professional development workshop in the North of Thailand, shared their insights on face-to-face (F2F) aspects in blended learning. Based on Activity Theory, a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and bite-sized journals gathered the opinions, and reflections of the participants. Then the data was, first, categorized and analyzed using framework analysis. Second, the outcomes, using the guiding principles of the second-generation human activity system model (Engstrom 1999), identified the tensions, and contradictions. The findings provide pertinent implications for secondary school contexts' with similar backgrounds, regarding F2F interactions, and identify suggestions for improving the F2F interactions beyond the confines of a classroom meeting.

Keywords:

activity theory; blended learning; English language teaching; professional development

Introduction

In the 21st century blended learning has been redefined and has become a progressive development in trying to fully integrate face-to-face (F2F) and online activities (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008). Furthermore, they defined blended learning as an organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary F2F(s) and online approaches and technologies. In terms of educational rationale, Garrison (2011) mentioned that the ability of blended learning design is to engage participants in critical reflection and discourse by creating a flexible and sustainable community of inquiry. This method of learning is intended to focus on learning outcomes that have societal values as well as the ability for the individual to continue learning. Hence, respecting these values and utilizing the abilities become the responsibility of both the parties involved namely the teachers, and the students.

To determine the values and outcomes, a research undertaking requires a sound theoretical framework.

According to Karasavvidis (2009), Activity Theory (hereafter AT) with its capacity to explore the points of tension within an activity system would serve as the most reasonable theoretical framework. In its current form, AT is expanded into Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (Cole, 1996) and is an invaluable instrument, which can help in the understanding of conflicts, friction, contradictions, and inconsistencies both between and within the components of an activity system (Engstrom, 1987; 1999). Engstrom's activity theory comprises three generations. All three generations are depicted either in the form of a single triangle or more than one triangle depending on the complexity of the system under investigation. The first generation relied heavily on the concept of meditation proposed by Vygotsky (1978, 1986), which brought cultural artifacts and human actions together and focused chiefly on individuals. Vygotsky clarified the distinction between the functions carried out by certain tools involved in mediating learning as 'externally oriented", and serving as a unit of conduction for the human influence that could be felt by a receiver of such an activity, and other indicators that are "internally oriented", and focusing on individuals becoming an expert of their own abilities (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55). The second generation takes into account the artifacts that might have an effect on the relationships in the activity system. The third generation, usually involves the integration of more than one activity system, and observes the combined activity or practice as the criteria for analyzing and not the individual activity alone.

Thailand, with its new reform on educational policy about applying the standardized framework, has demanded the capability of the teachers and schools to be measured under the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). This framework is an indicator to benchmark communicative language ability in all skills (Council of Europe, 2001), which is divided in 3 levels: Level A (basic users), Level B (independent users) and Level C (proficient users). In addition, the students need to reach an English proficiency of A1 level by the end of grade 6, A2 level by the end of grade 9, and B1 level by the end of grade 12 (Maxwell, 2015).

To reaffirm that agenda, many educational institutions in Thailand have been keen on conducting trainings or workshops. The chief aim of most workshops is to give guidance and support to meet the new perspectives of communicative skills set by the Thai Ministry of Education. There is little argument that a workshop becomes successful only if both a well-planned technological aspect and effective interaction in the classroom between the trainer and the learner are implemented in unison.

Despite recent steps to enhance self-regulated and autonomous learning, students continue to hold on to traditional modes of acquiring knowledge. Interestingly, Thai teachers, being the products of similar educational backgrounds, could hold on to such views. Therefore it would be prudent to understand the extent to which the F2F component affects the success of a blended learning workshop in teacher training workshops in such contexts. In the knowledge of the researchers, there is a lack of previous research primarily focused on meeting similar objectives in the regional context. As such, the present study investigated a case for the ASEAN context, and ventures to address this gap.

The study primarily investigates the F2F aspects in a blended learning model in an ICT Professional Development Workshop. The results and findings are expected to inform stakeholders involved on possible perceptions of the teachers, and recommendations or suggestions for the success of future blended learning projects in similar contexts in the ASEAN community.

Using the workshop in progress as the platform for gathering the teacher perceptions, this study formulated the following research questions.

Purposes of the Research

1. What are the Northern Thai Secondary teachers' perceptions towards the value of F2F instruction when using self-directed technological platforms in Professional Development through Blended Learning?

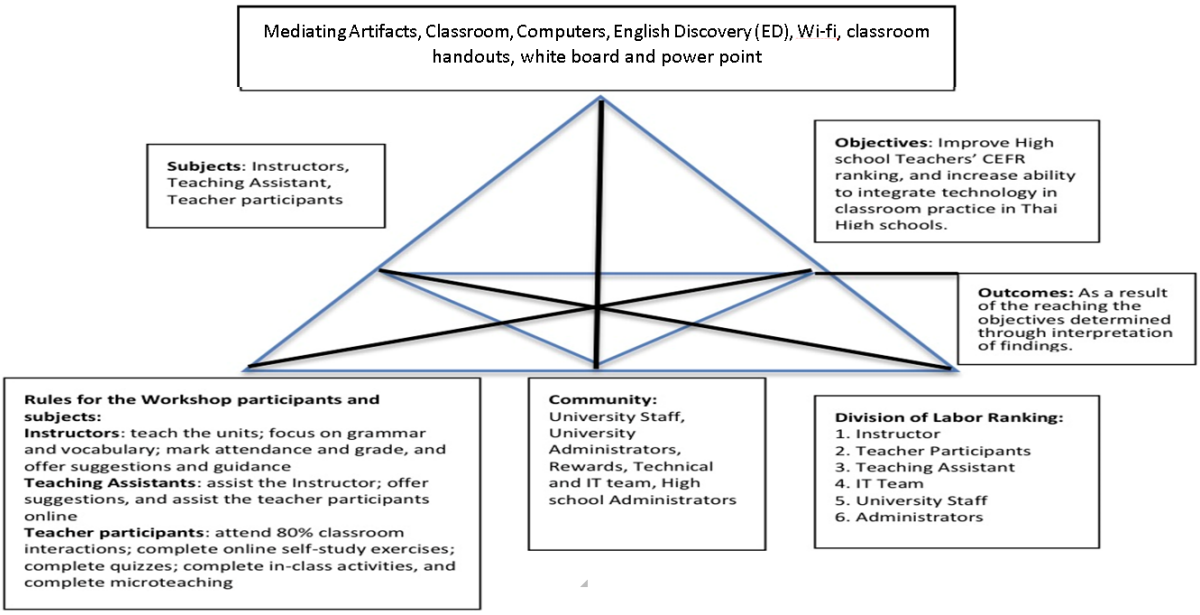

Figure 1. The second generation AT model for the study

2. What suggestions do the Northern Thai Secondary teacher participants offer for enhancing the F2F component of future Professional Development through Blended Learning?

Previous studies in the role of face-to-face instruction in e-learning, Brook and Oliver, 2007 in Garrison (2011) stated that the existence of instructors are also to support community development to increase students' sense of connectedness and learning. Garrison (2011) also believed that teaching presence is an essential service in identifying relevant societal knowledge, designing experiences that will facilitate reflection and discourse, as well as assist in diagnosing and assessing learning outcomes. An, Shin and Lim (2009), Bliss and Lawrence (2009), Gorsky, Caspi, Antonovsky, Blau, and Mansur (2010) in Garrison (2011) even emphasized that face-to-face interaction in e-learning is necessary to develop interaction and discourse which ensure participation and duality of responses. Within those developments of teaching presence, this study focused on how the role of face-to-face instruction conducted by peer teaching has met its function within the selected workshop activity system. For this purpose, the study selected a suitable theoretical framework to guide the process.

Theoretical Framework

Activity Theory with its potential to satisfy the investigation in innovation and technology rich projects, for example, an e-learning context, provided the theoretical framework for this study. As discussed in the Introduction, AT comprises three generations; however, the one utilized in this study is the second generation. In the second generation, which is the primary activity theory adopted for the present study, Engstrom (1987) argued that artifacts are necessary and inseparable units in human functions; however, the focus of mediation should remain on the relationships with the other units in the activity system. Figure 1 depicts the AT model, based on the second generation model showing the structure of human activity system proposed (Engtrom, 1987), with the possible points of intercept for the present study.

In Figure 1 the chief points of intercept are Mediating Artifacts at the apex of the triangle, which include items such as classroom, English Discovery (ED) program, and others. At the other points of the triangle lie the 'Rules for the Workshop', for all participating stakeholders, and 'Division of Labor' for all stakeholders involved. Furthermore, the triangle is also intercepted at its medial points by the influence

from the 'Subjects', 'Objectives of the professional development program', and the 'Community'. Finally the 'Outcomes' are generated as a consequence of the interactions among all the elements in the AT system. The above theoretical framework informed the methods and instruments for the study, which are detailed in the ensuing section.

Methodology

The purpose of the present study was, first, to identify secondary school teacher perceptions on the values of the F2F instructional component of a blended learning model in ICT professional development, and second, to identify factors from the suggestions offered by the teacher participants regarding the F2F component of a blended learning model that posed as barriers to secondary school teachers' ICT professional development. To meet the aims, a qualitative approach, which utilizes the interpretative research design based on AT was utilized.

Research Design

An Interpretive Research Design was used in this study. According to Borko et al., (2008 p.1025) interpretive research is driven by a basic logic that provides the central force, which is to search for local meaning. Furthermore, unlike research in teacher education where the chief aim is to identify stable proportions, interpretive research's quest subsumes the perceptions, descriptions, analysis and explanations of features in specific situations, yet, preserving the complexity and relaying the views of the actual participants. The current study utilized this design as it resonated with the quest of an interpretive researcher.

Participants and Sampling

In accordance with the purpose of the study the chief participants are 134 Thai High School teachers. As the teachers were already part of an ongoing professional development workshop, the sampling procedure is based on the principles of convenience sampling. It is pertinent to add that the researchers had no role in the distribution of the participants. The number of participants depended on the number enrolled, and present in class from the second F2F instructional weekend that was scheduled for April 1, 2017. The participants were distributed by the professional development organizers into 8 sections of numbers varying from fifteen to eighteen high school teachers, who were attending the professional development workshop. With respect to this study, only those high school teachers who achieved at least 80% workshop attendance were included. As such, the number of male participants were 17 and the female participants were 117. The ages of the participants ranged from 25 to 55. The participants were formally requested to volunteer their participation in the study through signing a consent form. In addition, the pool of participants included both genders, varied ages, educational qualifications, and were teachers of various subject disciplines. The focus was to gather the perceptions of the teachers teaching at high schools in the North of Thailand on the F2F aspects they encountered during the professional development training in the classrooms.

Study Context

This was an interpretative study and the location was a University in the North of Thailand where the ICT professional development was held. The data collection phase covered a total of 33 hours, and spanned three weekends. The study utilized three instruments in order to gather information a questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and bite-sized journals.

Questionnaire

An open-ended questionnaire comprising questions adapted from Ege Larson (2012), a previously validated and reliable instrument, was distributed following the first week of workshop implementation. The questionnaires were bilingual and comprised eleven questions.

Semi-structured Interviews

A single semi-structured interview mid-way into the workshop was conducted and recorded upon receiving the consent of five randomly chosen participants from the entire pool of teacher participants. Four questions enabled in guiding the semi-structured interviews. For instance, the teachers were asked

1) what were the benefits you got from the class interactions before using the online ED program?, 2) do you have any further suggestions about the implementation of, especially the F2F interactions in the workshop? However, the responses from the five teacher participants led to further relevant questions.

Bite-sized Reflective Journals

Two randomly chosen participants from each of the 8 sections were requested to maintain a journal on the researchers' 4 guided questions. The journals were collected before the end of the F2F rotations as scheduled by the University. The questions were framed to retrieve information that were bite size (Dunlop, 2016) and pertinent to interpreting the successful or flawed features of F2F modules in blended learning.

Data Collection Process

The first instrument to be applied was the questionnaire. As the participant pool involved both English Language Teachers and other subject specific teachers, the questionnaires were bilingual, and the teachers were given the freedom to relay their perceptions in either English or Thai language. The translation of the questions were deemed valid and reliable as an expert translator, who is also a qualified English language teacher, translated the questionnaire. There were 11 questions listed in the questionnaire. Out of the 134 participants attending the professional development workshop, 55 returned the completed questionnaires. An expert translator translated the responses.

Second, one semi-structured interview was conducted with five teacher participants after the fourth meeting of the workshop participants with their trainers. The interviews were carried out in English, and the verbal responses were received and recorded in English. Each interview lasted around 20 minutes and each teacher was asked around 4 leading questions.

Third, the bite-sized journals were distributed to two representative teacher participants from each of the 8 sections at the second meeting. It was collected at the end of the blended learning workshop. There were four questions that guided the teachers responsible to collect the perceptions of the high school teachers in their section. The representative teachers collected and recorded the reflections of their section in written form throughout the professional development workshop. They had to record the noticeable features voiced by their section that helped in the success of the activity introduced by the instructor-trainers for the day. The guiding questions in the bite-sized journals focused on 1) identifying features and activities responsible for the success of the blended learning workshop, 2) whether or not the instructor-trainers met the participants' learning goals, 3) how F2F interaction affected online activities, and 4) any further comments on F2F interaction during their blended learning workshop. These questions were also provided bilingually in English and Thai, which was translated by an expert and qualified English language teacher, thereby meeting the validity and reliability of the translation.

Data Analytical Procedures

Qualitative processes that involve thematic and framework analysis were first applied. The responses, written and verbal, as well as the journal entries presented in the Thai language were first translated, and transcribed by an expert translator and qualified English language teacher. Next, codes based on keywords form the questions were used to categorize the information. Following this, the categorized information was classified under the values perceived or the barriers noted. This representation was then utilized to systematically interpret the findings using the principles of Activity theory in order to identify the points of tension within the system under investigation.

Findings

Based on the three data collecting instruments a questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and bite-sized journal, the researchers collected participant perceptions in three major categories with respect to F2F 1) activities, ideas, resources or benefits that helped them understand the lecture and meet their goals, 2) challenges faced during F2F interaction that might deter the success of an online program as was

Table 1. Activities helping the Participants understand the Lecture

Activities that helped the participants understand the lecture			
Teacher Participant	**Response**	**Teacher Participant**	**Response**
T (1, 5, 10, 13, 16, 18, 19, 23, 31, 42, 44)	game-based learning activities	T (3, 9, 13, 18, 20, 25, 30, 36)	group-based activities
T (1, 11, 41)	self-directed learning	T (15, 27, 35, 42, 43)	doing some exercises and asking questions
T (2, 12, 32)	real-life situated learning	T 9	doing a presentation
T (4, 6, 17, 35, 39, 43, 45)	hands-on learning/ practical activities	T (21, 25, 26, 29)	collaborative learning activities
T (7, 10, 29, 35, 38)	role-play	T (27. 41)	activities that encourage students to think
T (8, 19, 20)	microteaching activities	T 44	technology-based activities

Table 2. Beneficial ideas from F2F interaction prior to Implementing the Online Aspect

Beneficial ideas from F2F interaction prior to implementing the online aspect	
Teacher Participant	**Response**
T (14, 22, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 42)	exchange knowledge/ideas
T (1, 5, 12, 32, 34, 36)	enable us to review, discuss, practice
T (1, 6, 13, 17, 26, 37, 48)	increase English skills
T (2, 3, 7, 10, 12, 16, 18, 19, 23, 27, 30, 39, 43, 44, 45)	enable us to learn and understand the content before online aspect
T (4, 7, 21, 24, 31, 33, 37, 42, 48)	enable us to ask and answer in the real time situations
T 17	facilitate negotiation skills
T (11, 15, 18)	enable instructor-trainers to access the learners' background knowledge
T (8, 15)	facilitate self-confidence and recognition of strengths

done in the present blended learning workshop, and 3) suggestions addressed to the instructor-trainers and program organizers to improve F2F aspects in the secondary educational contexts of Thailand. Exemplar responses and reflections from the three instruments are tabulated using the following identification alphabets and numbers 1) T1-T55 for the questionnaire responses 2) P1-P5 for the semi-structured interview, and 3) S1-S8 for the bite-sized journal reflections.

Findings for Category 1: Activities, Ideas, Resources or Benefits

In terms of activities, ideas, and resources gathered from the three instruments, the participants thought that in order for them to understand the lectures better it would be helpful to have a variety of activities.

As depicted in Table 1 from the questionnaire, the most popular activity was a game-based learning activity while only two teacher participants mentioned giving a presentation or using activities based on technology. Meanwhile, in terms of the beneficial ideas from the F2F interaction, they mentioned how the interaction itself aided them in pre-conceptual understanding, knowledge exchange, direct interaction, and developing communicative skills, which are necessary skills for collaborating in a real classroom.

As per Table 2, a majority of the teacher responses identified that F2F interactions helped them to learn, and understand the content before the online aspect, and helped in the exchange of ideas, and knowledge. While only a few teachers mentioned that F2F interactions enabled the improvement

Table 3. Resources that help the Participants understand the Lecture

Resources that help the participants understand the lecture	
Teacher Participant	**Response**
T (1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32, 36, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48)	technology platforms e.g. smartphones, computers, etc. (to show videos, any internet sources, presentation slides, games), games and multimedia resources
T (16, 23, 25, 32, 35, 43, 47)	supplementary worksheets
T (11, 15, 34, 40)	Animation resources
T (19, 22, 39)	role-play activities
T (3, 6, 7, 16, 19, 29, 34, 39, 45, 47)	other resources such as: mind-mapping, encourage the learners' interests,appropriate for the age group, reflects contents, improves interaction, reflects real situations, etc.

Table 4 Benefits from Class Interaction before using Online Programs

Benefits from class interaction before using online programs			
Teacher Participant	**Response**	**Teacher Participant**	**Response**
P1, P2	good for us	P4	Interaction in the class will help to review our knowledge
P1	is the real information	P3	I got some points from other teachers that we exchange during the activities
P1	good because I will review the lesson		
P1	learn it again	P4	speaking English in the class is very useful, pronunciation, about preparing the lesson plan
P2	there are a lot of activities		
P3	review my own ideas	P5	techniques to motivate the students

of negotiating skills, facilitated self-confidence or recognized strengths, and accessed learners' background knowledge.

Next, Table 3 depicts the responses related to the resources. The responses collectively present the notion of how practical resources such as those based on technology would be able to situate real-life based learning.

As depicted in Table 3, a vast majority of the teacher participants described their inclination for technologically based resources to help them understand. Very few teacher participants stated that traditional activities such as supplementary worksheets, mind mapping, role-play activities, and others were useful.

For category one, the semi-structured interview responses gathered regarding benefits in general could be summed up as the class interaction before using the online program was beneficial to them, especially in their interaction between their instructor-trainers and among the participants. Second, regarding specific benefits, they stated that the meta-cognitive benefits they gained would help them review their ideas, and improve their affective skills such as how to motivate the students in their own classrooms. Table 4 lists the benefits generated from the interview responses.

From the bite-sized journals, the pertinent views were mostly about the teachers' preparation for the class activity and whether the method to be applied in the class was a group-based activity or other. In terms of teachers' preparation, the participants classified it into how they create a lesson plan, and how they have to understand the objectives of each session. They felt that this could lead to a more-prepared class where the trainees or learners could easily follow the details. They felt that having more group-work is preferred since the

Table 5. Features that helped in the Success of the Activity introduced for the Day

Features that helped in the success of the activity introduced for the day	
Section Reflections	**Response**
S1	media, lesson plan, teacher's preparation, learner's preparation, using ICT in the teaching and learning practices...
S1, S2	... a group based activity ... each group needed to make a presentation
S1, S3	using different contents and teaching practices
S5	the preparations of the teachers, using some extra teaching materials in teaching and learning practices, collaborating and working on some activities as a group-based task, and having a clear explanation by teachers
S8	... learners tactic to make learners remember what you teach ... letting learners practice by themselves
S6	I think the participation and cooperation between the teacher and students are important...

Table 6. How F2F interaction helps Meet Emotional Needs

How F2F interaction helps meet emotional needs	
Teacher Participant	**Response**
T (2, 16, 20, 23, 24, 28, 31, 39, 40)	increase self-confidence in problem-solving, and gives more courage to learn
T (2, 5, 6, 8, 12, 19, 22, 26, 30, 33, 34, 37, 39, 45)	express our feelings
T (3, 5, 11, 24, 27, 33, 41, 48)	encourages us to learn
T (7, 15, 17, 37, 41, 44, 47, 48)	helps us be more understanding when delivering and responding to messages
T (9, 14, 18, 30, 31, 33, 35, 37, 41, 46)	better communciation and relationship
T (15, 17, 19, 27, 32, 47)	decrease anxiety
T (5, 8, 15, 43, 46)	There is a fun and happy feeling in joining the class.

Table 7. Challenging Methods that could Interfere with Understanding the Lecture

Challenging methods that could interfere with understanding the lecture	
Teacher Participant	**Response**
T (3, 4, 12, 41)	applying student-centered methods to focus on the ability to think and do tasks by themselves
T (2, 19, 26, 40)	teaching by demonstrating and giving some examples
T (1, 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 23, 25, 39, 42)	combining many teaching methods or presentation to focus on content in each unit
T (9, 27, 29, 35, 38, 44)	lecturing and encouraging note-taking (not in Thai)
T (1, 16, 32, 37, 38, 39, 46, 48)	game-based teaching
T (5, 8, 10, 17, 19, 22, 27, 30, 34, 37, 43, 47)	doing discussion with up-to-date topics and group-based

participants can collaborate with others to practice a variety of learning contents. Furthermore, the use of technologically based platforms to introduce, and present learning contents were considered interesting. Table 5 illustrates the discussion in this paragraph.

Findings for Category 2: Challenges during F2F Interaction

First, from the questionnaire, information was retrieved through specific questions regarding both meeting their emotional needs and the challenges the participants might have faced during F2F interaction that could have consequently deterred success in an online program as done in the present blended learning workshop. To this end, first, the information on how the F2F interactions helped the participants to meet their emotional needs was categorized. The categorized information depicted in Table 6 reveals that they felt an express need to have F2F interactions as it provided them with a platform to

Table 8. Teaching beliefs: Factors such as age, status, friendly relationships affecting F2F interaction

Teaching beliefs: Factors such as age, status, friendly relationships affecting F2F interaction	
Teacher Participant	**Some sample responses**
T (1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 25, 29, 31, 33, 40, 41, 49)	No effect because learning never ends
T (2, 12, 24, 31, 36)	Friendly relationship makes a better learning environment (freedom, relaxation, and friendliness).
T (3, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 35, 48)	Age and friendly relationship affected communciation.
T (8, 20)	When the instructor-trainers respect the students, this affects teaching and learning process (more effective).
T (11, 16, 17, 18, 35, 36, 43)	It affects learning.
T (21, 27, 28)	Friendly relationship increases self-confidence.
T (38, 42, 44)	They enable better consultation, exchanging ideas, and learning.

Table 9. Other possible challenges when time of F2F interaction is reduced in a blended-learning workshop

Other possible challenges when time of F2F interaction is reduced in a blended-learning workshop	
Teacher Participant	**Response**
T (1, 21)	traveling and main responsibility
T (3, 10, 43)	the efficiency of activity planning
T (5, 6, 9, 15, 17, 19, 23, 24, 30, 33, 34, 39, 42, 48, 49, 50)	needs self-discipline
T (7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 19, 22, 27, 35, 47, 51)	little time and too much responsibility that becomes a burden from school tasks
T (17, 25, 38, 45)	technology (associated problems)
T (2, 31, 40)	reducing face-to-face interaction will decrease learners' chance in communication and interaction

cope with their problems especially those related with self-confidence, encouragement while learning, anxiety, and communication. In this manner they also identified some of the problems that challenged their affective filters.

Second, the researchers gathered the challenges faced by the teacher participants in the blended learning workshop. The first challenge was categorized under teaching methods. In this case, what they had experienced before was different from what they experienced in the workshop. Table 7 offers a few pertinent statements uttered by the teacher participants, which indicate the challenges in teaching methods.

Third, another challenge faced by the participants was about their teaching beliefs. The researchers specified social factors in the questions such as age, status, and friendly relationship as the criteria needed in order to identify the specific factors that affected their interaction with their instructor-trainers. From this category, the researchers indirectly gathered their perceptions about what makes a better learning environment in the class. Most of the participants believed that a friendly relationship caused the major contribution in the learning process. This could be elaborated as the perceptions of the teacher participants regarding freedom to share or learn; feeling relaxed without pressure to perform, and a spirit of camaraderie in the class. They stressed that they felt little or no anxiety when communicating. A few participants; however, still identified the need for valuing age difference because it affected their communication and show of respect. Table 8 depicts some of the pertinent perceptions on this topic.

The last challenge retrieved from the questionnaire was one regarding possible challenges that would arise, in general, when F2F interactions between the instructor-trainers and the students were reduced. The researchers found that the participants were more concerned about the efficiency of activity planning, self-discipline, the burden of other responsibilities, and a lack of technological knowledge and its associated problems. Some of the responses retrieved from the questionnaire are listed in Table 9.

Table 10. Learning Difficulties faced during Workshop

Learning difficulties faced during workshop	
Teacher Participant	**Response**
P1	so long, so long time
P1	many many topics
P1	hard for me
P1	I am not an English teacher
P1	it's hard for me because I don't use English in my daily life
P2	We are not English teachers, I think our problem is grammar
P3	might be too long, the program is too long
P3	the period of the program
P4	for the organizer, the time is important
P4	Some teachers don't understand the direction, and some teachers don't participate in the activity like speaking or to show their own opinion,
P5	the hard part is to be like take more practice

Table 11. Suggestions Addressed to help instructor-trainers meet the participants' goals

Suggestions addressed to help instructor-trainers meet the participants' goals	
Teacher Participant	**Response**
T1	learning by doing and practicing
T2	facilitating thoughts
T4	slower pace
T5	have more connection and relationship with the participants
T12	exchanging experiences between the instructor-trainers and the participants
T14	decreasing the amount of homework
T16	noticing the participants' understanding
T25	applying activity-based learning that encourage students' interests
T28	applying media and technology
T33	having bilingual (Thai-English) in teaching and learning process
T35	more group-based and conversation-based activities

From the interview responses, the challenges faced by the participants in the workshop chiefly included difficulties with respect to the aspects of learning. In this case, the main concern of the participants was the length of the overall program. In addition, because some of them were not English teachers, they stated that they could not master the English skills as well as those who were. They also voiced some issues with respect to their busy schedule and allotting of available time to practicing what they have learnt once the workshop day ended. Table 10 displays the categorized learning difficulties.

In the bite-sized journals, the participants recorded their notes about their concern regarding how the lecturers need to know and understand the learners' needs in their language skills, proficiency level, and learning styles. They perceived this as one of the important values that would enable in building a good learning environment. In terms of challenges, they noted their concern in regards to microteaching methods, which they considered as a difficult challenge if they were not good in speaking or listening in English.

Findings for Category 3: Suggestions to Improve F2F Aspects

From the questionnaire responses, the participants identified that the instructor-trainers need to review and summarize the learning contents because it facilitated their daily learning better. They also believed that having more connection and relationship with the instructor-trainers helps them in understanding the day's topics. In addition, they also

Table 12. Critically linking ideas acquired in workshop to own classroom practice

Critically linking ideas acquired in workshop to own classroom practice	
Teacher Participant	**Response**
P1	techniques to teach my students about brainstorming
P1	give my students to present their knowledge in some topics of mathematics or activities, ... like mix the Mathematics to be used in daily life
P2	Some activities, I can adapt to my class
P3	during microteaching, we exchange the activities and I saw some points that I can try prepare and adjust them to fit my own context
P4	know like the objectives or the purpose of the lesson, about the level or the thing that we will teach to the students
P4	We can plan for our lesson.
P4	use the activities that teachers demonstrate ... can adapt it to use with our students
P5	depend on their proficiency, like individual difference, I think I will try to assign them in a suitable task ... because I think it's a pity for the poor students

identified the need to have bilingual communication in the learning process because they still felt that only using English language in the classroom impedes their ability to understand the lecture. Table 11 lists some sample suggestions to the instructor-trainers.

Meanwhile, suggestions were also addressed for the program organizers in terms of the best time allocation that needs to be considered for F2F interaction and online aspects in a blended learning workshop. First, from thirty four relevant responses on this issue, 29% of them perceived that the online learning aspect needed to be expanded more. The reasons highlighted the need to have more experience outside the classroom. They believed that this would ensure students to gain additional knowledge autonomously. In other words, the teacher participants felt that there is an urgency to have more autonomous learning. Meanwhile, and in contrast, 41% of the participants mentioned that the time for F2F interactions should be more than that allotted for the online learning aspect. They believed that having the time for reviewing and summarizing with the instructor-trainers helped them to better understand the learning contents that they received from the workshop.

Some of the responses also pointed out potential problems related with remote regional locations where technology is still one of the main issues to be resolved. In most cases, there is no stable connection that will allow the students to access their independent learning online. According to 6%, of the participant responses, splitting the time spent between F2F and online program equally is necessary as both processes were equally important. On the other hand, another 6% responses stated that they did not see the urgency to have a fixed percentage in time for the learning process between F2F and online learning, but added that any process should consider the learners' various needs.

From the interview responses, the participants explained how the techniques that they learnt in the professional development workshop in-class sessions could help them critically extend their knowledge, which could be brought to their own professional duties. They also believed that enriching classroom activities makes the lessons to become more practically connected with daily routines. Furthermore, some of the participants mentioned that microteaching done in the class after learning, made a positive impact in the acquisition of ideas for their future classroom practice. Table 12 lists some ideas that the participants shared on the topic.

Furthermore, following the identification of the possible learning difficulties some feasible solutions were gathered from the interview responses. Based on the proposed solutions and listed in Table 13, one that was favored by most of the interviewees is in the grouping of individuals that could support a networking system outside the workshop. They stated that they would like to have not only the activities inside the classroom, but also continued sharing and learning outside the classroom.

Table 13. Possible solutions for the learning difficulties experienced during workshop

Possible solutions for the learning difficulties experienced during workshop	
Teacher Participant	**Response**
P2	always do the activity in group, so we can share the ideas with each other, and we can help each other
P3	depends on the trainees as well as to manage their schedule, their time
P4	maybe random, to work in pairs to work in groups or just by oneself to do the activity to speak
P5	yes it's necessary to practice more and more
P5	get the goal in the good technique to use in the classroom
P2	always arrange our group, a small group, arrange everyweek, so we can meet other people and we can change ideas with each other

Table 14. Suggestions for implementing improved face-to-face interaction

Suggestions for implementing improved face-to-face interaction	
Teacher Participant	**Response**
P1	communciate one by one more and more
P4	each section or each class should have the same ... like... same content or the same activity
P4	some teachers in our school didn't do the online learning so I think (the organizer) should close in time
P5	problem because each of us has a different context, some of schools are located on the hills, high hills, is very poor schools, will be lacking of the computer or the Internet

Table 15. Suggestions that could help lecturers meet the participants' learning goals

Suggestions that could help lecturers meet the participants' learning goals	
Section Reflections	**Response**
S5	... knowing and understanding the learners' needs in terms of their language skills, proficiency levels, and also their preferences in teaching and learning methods ...
S8	... teaching demonstrations can be applied for students by adapting and...
S7	... material creating sessions needed to be interesting and up-to-date
S5	... focus more on the language contents and knowledge... to obtain and apply it in learning process
S1	... doing some activities by using and applying group-based method... should include the negotiation between teachers and learners while doing the activities.
S5	... suggestions that help the teacher to answer learners' objectives and needs... those matters will help guide teachers in designing and preparing teaching materials and styles.

In addition, the researchers gathered the perceptions of the interviewed teacher participants on further suggestions that could enrich F2F interaction in the blended-learning workshop. The responses indicated that not only should the instructor-trainers share and be familiar with their activity contents, but also the program organizers should be able to achieve a higher percentage of attendance and increase the F2F interaction between instructor-trainers and the participants. Table 14 displays the additional suggestions to the instructor-trainers and program organizers.

From the bite-sized journals, the participants recorded their notes about what can be improved. They also recommended that the lecturers need to have an attitude to be up-to-date with anything that can be shared in the class, as this will encourage students' interest to study more. Table 15 displays the suggestions from the bite-sized journals.

Discussion

This section will present the points of tension and the contradictions identified within the activity system (Engstrom, 1999) and between the activity system elements as per the second generation AT (Engstrom, 1999) displayed in Figure 1. In addition, it will simultaneously highlight the features responsible

for the success in the enacted policies. It is prudent to bear in mind that this representation is not exhaustive, but provides some key findings that highlight the possible points of tension that could be addressed for future professional development in blended learning especially in the regional context (Garrison, 2011). Furthermore, these points of tensions and contradictions could inform policy makers and help initiate future steps to minimize them.

Tensions within the activity system

Participants summarized tensions in the mediating artifacts by calling for the implementation of a variety of activities and resources that would reduce the boredom, encourage learning, and suit the age group of the learners. In other words, it can be stated that a mere provision of technological implements does not improve the chance of success in a blended learning workshop. It is evident that the in-class activities designed and facilitated by the instructor and teaching assistant play a more dominant role. The participants provided a critical view in addition to the voices in favor of the F2F interactions. It is prudent to acknowledge their positive view as a limitation of the study as the participants were also directly involved as the workshop trainees in the blended learning workshop. Therefore they would most probably favor the classroom interaction and state that it provided a much-needed pre-conceptual platform for understanding the online tasks.

Next, the tension within the subjects was identified from the participants' words affirming that despite the positive exchanges between the instructor and them, they were still anxious about how to practically apply student-centered methods to enhance their students' critical thinking and self-reliance. Furthermore, they also indicated that applying communicative learning, such as brainstorming, doing presentations, and other communicative activities were challenging.

Another point of tension within the subjects was the possible distinction in age, and status between the subjects. The participants reiterated that valuing age difference is necessary because it could affect their communication and show of respect. However, contradicting this point of tension, the participants indicated that the friendly relationship among the subjects enabled a better learning environment in class.

Third, the tension with the division of labor or ranking was also identified. The participants stated that they were more concerned with the efficiency of activity planning, self-discipline, responsibility burden, and their own lack of technological skills. These identified aspects indicate the necessity for those in the division of labor, and in charge of planning and carrying out these tasks need to take further steps to reduce the concern that pertains to their duties.

The fourth tension identified was within the community and related to an organizational aspect. The participants explained that travelling from their point of origin to the workshop location was a burden. In addition, they felt that the time to respond to all the tasks was limited and the overall length of the program was too long.

Fifth, a tension within the rules for the workshop participants was identified. This point of tension was more concerned with the split between the online practice activities or self-study autonomous learning plans, and the F2F in-class instruction and practice. The majority of the participants felt that the time spent on the F2F component was insufficient.

Tension between components of the AT system

The first tension was identified between the subjects and the rules of workshop participants and subjects. In this area, the participants voiced their concern about the inability to complete the online or out of class assignments due to their busy schedule, and difficulty with managing their time to consistently practice after the class.

Another tension between the subjects and the rules of workshop participants and subjects was with respect to a majority of the teacher participants' inept English language skills as neither were they previously majored in English nor did they teach English in their schools. Therefore they reiterated that a bilingual in-class atmosphere would be beneficial. Furthermore, the tension was identified not only between the subjects and rules of workshop participants, but also

between the subjects, rules of the workshop, and the objectives component. The tensions here related to the inadequate computer and technical skills, which impeded the participants from completing the online tasks effectively and completely. Moreover, the tension arising from the participants' perceptions of the instructors' ability and their own continuous professional development indicated a link that could encourage the students to study more.

The next tension was identified between the subjects and the community. As gathered from the findings, the participants felt that the organizing committee's presently allotted time for the F2F interactions was insufficient. In addition, the Information Technology team did not schedule a deadline for submitting assignments, which allowed for some participants to sit back till the last minute and complete their assignments. This practice was objectionable to the participants who were diligent.

The final point of tension deciphered was between the rules of workshop participants and subjects, and the outcomes for the blended learning program. The participants expressed the feeling of nervousness and stress during and at the end of the program as they were compelled to complete all the tasks that were assigned. With the restrictions in time available to the participants, they felt this might have hindered the magnitude of the positive outcomes of the program. However, a contradiction was also identified when participants called for exposure to similar workshops and the importance of such workshops for their continuous professional development. According to Mizell (2010), school systems have the responsibility to strengthen the performance levels of their educators through professional developments. Furthermore, Mizell (2010) argues that educators can improve their skills and increase student achievement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has described the case regarding secondary school teacher perceptions on the F2F aspects in a blended-learning project. The participants in this study were the workshop trainees, who were given a chance to experience the process of implementing blended learning and improve their English proficiency in order to meet the CEFR standards. Employing the second generation model of Activity Theory proposed by Engstrom (1999), this paper has portrayed their perceptions toward the value of F2F instruction on using self-directed technological platforms.

From the voices gathered, it can be concluded that the participants responses identified the points of tension—as previously stated by Karasavvidis (2009) that Activity Theory would be able to assist in identifying and exploring them—that need to be addressed. These tensions included concerns with respect to the efficiency of the technological platforms, time management, age and status, labor ranking, community, and future implementation in their own classes. Even though they insisted on the need for using a technological platform to encourage the learning process, they seemed to have doubts whether technology supports learning as they doubted themselves about the skills they might possess. Consequently, they conveyed their need for more F2F interaction to prepare them in their future classes following the completion of the blended learning project. Some proposed that demographic and social variables such as age and status might hinder the relationship among workshop participants. Even so, workload and distance were identified as the more serious obstacles in some instances as they had to manage their duty and responsibilities to fulfil the assigned tasks.

To improve the practice and program design for future implementation, addressing the need to present the nature of blended learning is still indispensable. Ross (2011) has previously mentioned that the essential notion of the project should always be linked to sustainable follow-up with authentic and active learning experiences. As the participants of the project, they should understand that technological platforms are not the main access to information but available tools to support the learning experiences of the students. Reasonably, this belief should also be appropriately supported by the institution in terms of resources, course suitability, and management systems.

Further suggestions are made to ensure practical implementation for better development of management

systems; including its policy and time scheduling. Moreover, the suggestions also described its importance in support systems, such as in planning and resources—technology and human. If the participants think that technology is still the main obstacle, then the main responsibility of any institution is to provide technological training to shape the partcipants' perception about its effective use. Simultaneously, the participants need to acquire a flexible attitude toward the learning process of technology training.

Even though this study has investigated multifaceted disciplines, it was conducted in a single educational institution. Further research is encouraged to employ the theory used and modify the research methodology utilized in this study. The researchers suggest this step be undertaken before implementing it in a larger scale of blended learning projects, which might involve several educational institutions. It is expected that this study featured possible recommendations and suggestions for the success of future blended learning projects in similar contexts in ASEAN. Also, focusing on subsequent classroom observations of the participants while using a case study approach might garner indepth perceptions and observations, and could further contribute to the extensive research of blended learning in professional development; however, with an emphasis on the ASEAN regional contexts.

• • •

References

An, H., Shin, S., & Lim, K. (2009). The effects of different instructor facilitation approaches on students' interactions during asynchronous online discussions. *Computers & Education*, *53*(3), 749–760. Retrieved from-http://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0360131509001079

Bliss, C. A., & Lawrence, B. (2009). From posts to patterns: A metric to characterize discussion board activity in online courses. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *13*(2), 15-32

Borko, H., Whitcomb, J. A., & Byrnes, K. (2008). Genres of research in teacher education. In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Felman-Nemser & D. J. McIntyre (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (3rd ed., pp. 1017-1049). New York: Routledge.

Brook, C. & Oliver, R. (2007). The learning community development model: A lens for exploring community development in online settings. In C. Montgomerie & J. Seale (Eds.), *Proceedings of ED-MEDIA 2007--World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications* (pp. 1744-1753). Vancouver, Canada: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE). Retrieved from https://www.learntechlib.org/p/25608/.

Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ege Larsen, J. L. (2012). *Teacher and student perspectives on a blended learning intensive English program writing course*. IOWA State University. Graduate Theses and Dissertations. Paper 12375. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/1zyNqLi

Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research.* Orienta-Konsultit, Helsinki.

Engestrom, Y. (1999). Innovative learning in work teams: Analyzing cycles of knowledge creation in practice. In Y. Engestrom, R. Miettinen and R.-L. Punamaki (eds.) *Perspectives on Activity Theory*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, (pp. 377-404).

Garrison, D. R. (2011). *E-Learning in the 21st century: A framework for research and practice* (2nd ed.). London, U.K: Routledge, Taylor and Francis

Garrison, D. & Vaughan, N. (2008). *Blended learning in higher education: Framework, principles, and guidelines*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Gorsky, P., Caspi, A., Antonovsky, A., Blau, I., & Mansur, A. (2010). The relationship between academic discipline and dialogic behavior in open university course forums. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *11*(2), 49-72.

Karasavvidis, I. (2009). Activity theory as a conceptual framework for understanding teacher approaches to Information and Communication Technologies. *Journal of Computers & Education*, *53*(2), 436-444. doi>10.1016/j.compedu.2009.03.003

Maxwell, D. (2015, November 01). Educational inequality remains rife in Thailand despite promised reforms. Retrieved from https://asiancorrespondent.com/2015/03/educational-inequality-thailand/

Mizell, H. (2010). Why professional development matters. *Learning Forward*. Retrieved from https://learningforward.org/advancing/whypdmatters.cfm

Ross, J. D. (2011). *Online professional development: design, deliver, succeed*! Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: *The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language* (A. Kozulin, Ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.