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Submission date: 03-Jan-2023 03:19PM (UTC+0900)

Submission ID: 1833630266

File name: ecting_the_success_of_blended_learning_in_English_classrooms.pdf (256.42K)

Word count: 3614

Character count: 20293

Factors Affecting the Success of Blended Learning in English Classrooms

By

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Abstract

The use of the technology in English language teaching context has been widely dispersed lately. The results of some studies have revealed that the integration of technology into the classroom has shown positive results on the quality of learning and students' motivation in learning. However, the extent to which students indeed get the benefits of blended learning (BL) has not been revealed by previous studies. This paper is a sketch of how blended learning affects the learning quality as viewed from the students' perspectives. Data sources were obtained through two groups of students from different departments who were taking English classes. The online survey and interviews were used for data collection. This study showed several aspects contributing to the quality of blended learning: well-structured blended learning program, learning through interactions, online instructor, learning flexibility, plentiful relevant information and favorable learning environment.

Keywords:

Blended learning, technology, interaction, teaching and learning process

Introduction

In the last decades, blended learning has been attracting the attention of researchers, especially in the context of teaching English (ELT). Altay and Altay (2019) have reviewed numerous studies about blended learning and reported satisfying results. They mentioned that blended learning not only enhanced the acquisition process and language development, students' increased participation in the classroom but also promoted students' achievement through extensive practice regardless of time constraints and place.

Facilitating the participants with a variety of instructional inputs and promoting interactive learning are some characteristics of blended learning. For example, Albhansawy & Aliweh (2016) made use of social media as a medium of the instructions to the pre-service teachers when implementing blended learning. This social media was proven to be an effective tool in giving the participants ideas, views and experiences since they could watch movies, review the materials relevant to their needs. Their understanding about the topics and teaching skills were further strengthened by their tutor's direct interactions during the face-to-face sessions.

Some success stories about blended learning are quite ubiquitous in many western countries. To some extent, it is because these countries have favorable technical supports while autonomous learning issues have been firmly rooted in their culture. That is not the case with Asian countries. Adams, Sumintono, Mohamed & Noor (2018) mentioned that the main obstacle in BL learning was related to the low level of Malaysia students' readiness to learn using technology. Autonomous learning habits have not become their culture yet. Unfortunately, there seemed to be strong tendencies from them to maintain traditional way where both supervision and monitoring from the teachers are obviously seen. In addition, other obstacles are related to the availability of internet connections and other supporting electronic equipment. Yang (2014), Nissen and Tea (2012) found the issue of the effectiveness of blended learning was related to teacher readiness in the use of technology. Teachers' low self-efficacy about technological issues

has affected their low willingness to carry out blended learning. Fischbacher & Smith. (2016) emphasized that readiness as seen in the form of organizational commitment, competence and awareness was an absolute requirement for effective blended learning program.

Learning from the above background, we then ask if effective blended learning is possible to do in the context of ELT Asia. What factors influence the attitude of participants in blended learning so that they are able to become independent learners and make achievements? This paper is a sketch of the views of students in two Pragmatics and TEFL classes about aspects that underlie their motivation in learning during a blended learning program.

Method

This research used a case study as a research design. While the researcher was teaching in two (Pragmatics class and TEFL class) in the last even semester of 2018-2019 school year, this position allowed him to collect data about how the students perceived the blended learning program.

In practice, the writer implemented blended learning in Pragmatics and TEF using the flipped model: online-offline interaction models, assignments (tasking), and learning management systems. As such, the students in both classes were required to study all materials online first. To begin learning about a new topic, they had to read instructional objectives, watch films, read articles and do assignments online. In the same week, they had face to face class with the writer (off-line). The students in both classes used Canvas as Learning Management System (LMS). Canvas was selected because of its complete online navigation features: user friendly (mobile apps and downloadable in low file size capacities), linkable and sharable application, collaborative works, multiple features of assessments (multiple choice, peer reviews and project based tasks). Two models of tasks were given during the online assignments: highly structured (multiple choice) and less structured (discussions/essays/projects). The multiple choice tasks (10%) were weighted lower than those of discussion/essay/projects (90%).

In depth interviews were chosen as data collection techniques. Six students were selected as the key informant. They were high achievers whose scores were more than ninety. Their views were expected to provide a comprehensive explanation of the attitudes, behaviors and strategies they had shown to achieve success in their studies.

Findings

Based on the results of the interviews with research subjects, this study found about six factors identified to become the keys for successful blended learning program: well-structured materials, various instructional delivery techniques, online instructors, learning flexibility, flexible relevant information and favorable learning environment.

Well-structured blended learning program

A well-structured blended learning program is an aspect that emphasizes the importance of presenting online material in a clear, complete, and sequential manner. The information about learning objectives, rules, and learning activities to achieve the goals should well defined and presented. In Pragmatics and TEFL online learning, such information was found on every first page of Canvas webpage. Having been presented at front part of the webpage, the students always read this information before doing some other tasks such as reading the material or completing the assignments. The deadlines for each task were also shown in Canvas. A lot of students admitted that the information about deadlines was very important so that they could

manage their time whether they had to work on the assignments or do some other responsibilities.

Complete supporting materials such as films and texts (power points or articles) were necessary to prepare in BL. Such various instructional inputs helped the students to understand the topics better. The students claimed that film was very helpful to learn difficult concepts. Moreover, they found easier to read the contents of the article text after watching films. As such, films played a role in activating their schemata in learning new materials.

The materials are understandable and very helpful for us. I love watching youtube and having the material on it really helps me enjoying the study process. I also use other related youtube videos and some articles about Cognitive levels. The youtube link has increased my interest in Bloom's taxonomy. (Amy-female-High Achiever-TEFL class)

I read the materials through PDF file and the YouTube video that were provided. Mostly I do understand by watching the video, rather than reading. I did not use any other resources, for me, the video explanation is enough. (Vania-female-High Achiever-TEFL class)

Another advantage of learning concepts through film was that students could watch it over and over again if they did not understand the concepts. Repeated practices made them not only more familiar with the technical terms relatively easier to understand theoretical explanations of the topics learned. To further explore the concept, they read articles prepared online.

I read and tried to understand the article about Pragmatics concept at least 3 times. Then, I watched all the online video. But I think it was just in different media, the content among them were totally the same. Hopefully, next video contains different source and knowledge (Sandi-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class)

I read all the article and gladly, the lecturer give some underline and box so we can know the emphasis and the main point of the article. It makes us as the students understand the material easily. (Ade-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class)

Learning through interactions

The interaction enabling an exchange of ideas through online discussion was a part of learning in blended. Most students enjoyed doing it. According to them, the task of discussion provided opportunities for them to deepen their understanding of the concepts being learned with the online learning community. However, they claimed that intellectual discussions took place due to several reasons. First, interactive discussions were possible because the instructor was able to create questions eliciting their critical thinking. Second, the instructor provided clear and clear rules about what to do and what not to do during the online program. For example, they students were required to post at least three times in one discussion thread. Otherwise, their scores were reduced or not being able to get perfect scores. Third, the instructor always provided feedback or comments on the students' work/ideas. According to the students, this instructor active participation was regarded as genuine attention towards the students. Fourth, most students were motivated to learn by actively involved in the discussion.

In short, the students claimed that the discussion made them to better understand the topic. In discussions, students have plenty of time to reflect on their own views and others. Because all students' ideas in the discussion were recorded, they could take advantages of these materials for review. They learned detailed explanation and examples from the discussions.

The students felt that the feedback or opinions of friends in the discussion provided inspiration for them to stimulate new ideas. Their friend's opinion gave them inspiration to create new learning strategies.

Yes, I learned a lot from the discussion. By reading others' feedback, I got more insights and good consideration that unconsciously improve myself (Vania-female-High Achiever TEFL class).

Discussions provided information that helped them to learn a difficult concept. This was possible because friends and instructors elaborated the concepts by giving examples and more detailed explanations.

I read all updated posts until 2 days ago. I wish I had more time to comment on the updated posts. I have very compact activities during last few days (Amy-female-High Achiever-TEFL class).

I read almost all posts in the discussion. However, I did not have any chance to reply them all because I had to study other face to face class in campus. I think to make the discussion better, students have to be reminded to join the discussion early (not too close with the deadline). (Vania-female-High Achiever-TEFL class).

I think 95% by the rest. It is because the layout of each students's answer is so near by others. I cannot distinguish which one is comment and answer in one sight. So the page is not truly good at layouts. (Sandi-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class).

Yes, I am. Because the lecturer said that my answer was wrong, I try to find my failure by reading all my friends example and their explanation. (Ade-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class).

Face to face class was a learning session where the instructor and students had direct interaction after the online learning. Face to face meeting turned into a concept refinement session where the students learned more from the instructor's explanation. In fact, they became active to ask questions and give opinions in the class.

Learning flexibility

Learning flexibly in the sense that no physical attendance was required in the classroom and no pressure to learn in fixed time schedules was to fulfill became the hallmark of the blended learning model. First, clarity about the schedules enabled the students to determine their priority. Second, the existence of mobile applications for learning management systems was another factor making learning flexible. With this application, students could access online material using electronic devices.

The students attending Pragmatics and TEFL class generally made use of free time at home to explore the material. Being at home was seen as relaxing that favored effective learning. They enjoyed learning more than doing the tasks in formal atmospheres. Amy was one of the most mature and married students. For her, being at home with her family gave her a sense of comfort and calm. Psychological comfort helped her to understand the material or topic better.

Yes. I really like online learning because it is flexible and gives me time to explore more. I understand many things by doing things myself, after being suggested what to do. As long as there is a deadline and goal, online learning will be the best platform for me. I usually watch and read them at home. (Amy-female-High Achiever-TEFL class).

They started learning much earlier. They made notes on important points. When doing preparation early, they felt confident. This positive self-efficacy seemed to promote deep learning with the material provided by the instructor.

I read and watched the materials start from February 1st 2019. First trial I did only take notes on the materials, then after that I tried to deepen my understanding by creating a draft of the BQ before I posted it on Canvas (Vania-female-High Achiever-TEFL class).

The students took advantage of the momentum anytime they had free time. They preferred to work with laptops since they had a bigger screen than those of handphones.

I read in anywhere but I only watch the video when I am at home throughout my laptop. It is more practical and better (Sandi-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class).

I study the Pragmatics in the evening in my room because I need to be focus on the material (Ade-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class).

Yes, the discussion has a good influence for students to be brave in stating their ideas and perspectives related to the discussion's topic (Vania-female-High Achiever-TEFL class).

Yes, when I don't really know about the lesson. But, if I am getting better in comprehension, it is quite hard to discuss by online. This belongs to number 10: Yes. But I hope we can also be active like that in offline course situations (Sandi-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class).

Yes. Because I got some chance to apply my knowledge. So I am not only learning by reading but also learning by doing it (Ade-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class).

Online instructor

The role of online instructors was crucial. For the students, the teacher feedback was very important to improve their work. The students expected prompt feedback from the instructor. As such, they had opportunities to revise their work. They also hoped that their instructor checked and gave comments on their work. This information confirmed that the repetitive learning cycle was very important to promote quality learning.

The students expected multi-roles of the online instructor. They expected that the instructor not only had the teaching skills by presenting material, providing explanations and feedback but also had passion to motivate them to learn. For example, they students enjoyed hearing reminders from the instructor from group instant messenger about the coming tasks/assignment. Giving reminder is very important via instant messenger.

Personally the lecture has given an important role on many things. His comment, his revision, and his words on encouraging and motivating the students. Yet, what thing I like the most is the lecture always remind the students to do the tasks by whatsapp. Thus, the students will not miss any information (Vania-female-High Achiever-TEFL class).

All the discussion since the comments of the lecture are detailed and shot in the right context (Sandy-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class).

Yes, the lecturer did a good job on the discussion through the feedback that the lecturer give to our answer. If student A did something wrong with his/her work, the lecturer didn't judge the answer and try to stimulate student's curiosity to find the right answer (Ade-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class).

Favorable learning Environment

Favorable learning environment was associated with social bonds between all members of the community to provide mutual thought and emotional support. When doing so, they had the motivation to learn. The students claimed several factors promoting favorable learning environment. First, the prevailing rules as agreed upon between instructors and students were very effective. These rules such as avoiding plagiarism, including citation sources served as guidance for them about what to do online. They were also required to make polite comments. In short, these rules served as a hedge that protected all students to behave properly. When the students broke these rules, they would be given sanctions such as giving a reprimand and deduction of the scores. Second, the initiative to build relationships between participants through social media groups (Whatsapp) proved to be quite effective. This media enabled the instructor to remind participants of assignments, provide additional motivation and explanation of learning difficulties.

The students gave very positive views of all their peers' posts in the online discussions. They were information seekers who were always eager to learn from others. They always had the desires to interact with others' opinions and wanted to learn from the opinions of others.

Well, my friends are mostly quite cooperative. They listen to the teacher;s instructions. They manage themselves to post their ideas in the discussion on time. As everybody is not late to submit the work, we could learn from each other, reading their ideas (Amy-female-High Achiever-TEFL class).

My friends are very helpful). Once I was sick. They told me what to do in the assignment. I like them. They are so attentive to me. (Vania-female-High Achiever-TEFL class).

95% of my friends are quite active in the online program. I am not sure with the rest. When we are doing online assignment, we learn from each other from our ideas. Well, I don't mind being

criticized. In fact, my friends never criticize me. They gave constructive ideas. I like them. (Sandi-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class).

I think my friends are quite honest. If my ideas are bad, then they say it to me. I feel okay. In the same way, I also put my criticism to the people if they have irrelevant ideas. They feel okay too. Hehehe I really like this (Ade-male-High Achiever-Pragmatics class).

Discussions

Blended learning becomes a strategic instructional model that teachers can use to achieve effective and efficient learning goals. A review conducted by Altay and Altay (2019) provides clear evidence of how blended learning can increase learning motivation, social bonds, skills and foreign language acquisition, if managed appropriately. Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000) assert that at least three aspects influence the success of blended learning: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. In other words, if educators wish to benefit from the blended learning process, a complete and consistent structure of the instructional design is required. A complete structure requires clarity and complication of learning objectives, and is supported by a variety of relevant and up to date sources. Being consistent requires educators to run the whole program in accordance with the previously set agreements. That the instructor is active in facilitating participants with a communication model that provokes thought but remains friendly is the main requirement for the creation of a pleasant learning community.

The results of this study are a reflection of the voices of students. Their expectations are actually a highlight of the thoughts of Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000). The aspects found in this study are as follows: structured blended learning programs, learning through interactions, online instructors, learning flexibility, plentiful relevant information and favorable learning environments.

Adopting and adapting blended learning as a learning model is a step forward. This step is not an easy thing to do for most teachers who still big fans of old teaching paradigm where traditional face-to-face learning is the core. In fact, the attitude of independence to take the initiative of learning is still not a tradition of our students. Adekola, Dale, & Gardiner (2017) suggested the support of all parties to seriously realize blended learning. This does not only require physical/virtual infrastructure, technology support, pedagogical, management and organizational capacity building, institutional culture and sensitivity to norms and ethical aspects.

Conclusion

The successful learning in the context of blended learning is not solely determined by the students' L2 proficiency. Some technical aspects such as the availability of technological support and technological prowess are indeed essential for achieving an effective blended learning program. Yet, some other non-technical situational aspects contributing to their motivation to learn seriously are worth noting: well-structured blended learning program, learning through interactions, online instructor, learning flexibility, plentiful relevant information and favorable learning environment. The more the instructor cares about these non-technical aspects, the more they have their learning goals to achieve effectively.

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