

Thai EFL Learners' Experiences of Blended Language Learning

Nuttakritta Chotipaktanasook*

Abstract

Blended learning has dramatically gained in popularity in language education in recent years. Although the usefulness of blended learning in English as a foreign language (EFL) programs has been well documented in literature, there is still a lack of qualitative research into language learners' experiences and the role they play in this learning environment. In this study, a convenience sampling method was employed to recruit prospective participants. They were first-year students of six major universities in Thailand which were active in blended language learning programs. Out of 215 students, 12 were randomly selected for an interview for their qualitative views. The purpose was to explore how EFL learners experienced blended learning implemented in their language courses. The interview findings showed both favourable and unfavourable experiences. While Thai EFL learners in this study appreciated the capacity of blended course in fostering language skills, language learning strategies, and learning skills, they experienced certain level of frustration. The paper concludes with the implications of these results in terms of teaching practice.

Keywords: Blended Learning/ Learner Experiences/ EFL

Introduction

In the language classroom, our students regularly engage in a range of technologies with the potential to enhance their language learning (for a recent review, see Lee, 2010; Stockwell, 2012; Thomas, Reinders, & Warschauer, 2013). This allows an increasing number of second or foreign language (L2) teachers to acknowledge that the language classroom should be different. Motivated by the need for creating engaging learning environments, new technologies are being introduced into language education. This trend leads to the emergence of a relatively new learning environment called blended learning which has been defined in various ways (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). However, there is a general agreement that blended learning involves the combination of face-to-face (f2f) instruction with an appropriate use of technology or computer-assisted language learning (CALL) applications. In this study, the focus of CALL is on any form of online technologies, and, for the primary focus of this study, the definition is

* Lecturer, Business English Department, Faculty of Arts, Dhurakij Pundit University

specific to L2 learning and localized to tertiary learning institutions. As the trends in higher education in general are increasingly towards the integration of technology and f2f learning and teaching (Simasathiansophon, 2014), the field of language education is no exception. In fact, blended learning is now widely used in the language curriculum (Bueno-Alastuey & Pérez, 2014; Reinders, 2012; Tosun, 2015) in order to meet the demands of language learners.

While many studies have highlighted the effectiveness of blended learning for proficiency gains (Redfield & Campbell, 2005), literature on blended language learning, especially at the tertiary level in the EFL contexts, such as Thailand, seems under examined. Further research is thus required in English language teaching (ELT) contexts (Tomlinson & Whittaker, 2013). Most studies in EFL tertiary education have focused on quantitatively examining the superiority of blended instruction over traditional f2f teaching (Gleason, 2013) and indicated positive effects of the newer environment. However, technology alone cannot create successful blended learning. In fact, the successful implementation of a new learning environment incorporating technology, like in the case of blended learning, should be based on the understanding of experiences learners have gained (Murday, Ushida, & Chenoweth, 2008). Learners must be included and their perspectives need to be investigated because they are considered as ‘experts on their learning and the benefactors of well-developed materials’ (Kessler & Plakans, 2001, p. 15). Without an understanding of learners’ experiences, it would be difficult to create new and effective language learning environments. Thus, it is worthwhile to investigate how learners experience blended learning in their language courses.

Objective and Research Question

The main aim of this study was to investigate Thai EFL learner experiences with blended language learning courses at the tertiary level in Thailand. The research question was:

How do Thai EFL learners experience blended learning implemented in their English courses?

Review of Related Literature

Literature has shown that blended learning can make a profound impact on language learners in a number of ways. Importantly, the use of blended learning can improve learners' motivation and attitudes (Ushida, 2005). Sucaromana (2013), for instance, examined the effects of blended learning on university EFL students. The participants were randomly assigned into a treatment group taught by using blended learning and a control group taught by using f2f learning. The findings indicated that the treatment group exhibited a significantly higher intrinsic motivation for learning English, a better attitude towards English, and better satisfaction with the learning environment. Shih (2010) also explored the effects of blended learning through the use of blogging as an instructional strategy in an English for a specific purpose (ESP) course. The author found that a blended learning environment enhanced learning effectiveness and learners' motivation. The findings also revealed that peer's and instructor's feedback and blog features were key factors that helped enhance learners' motivation to learn L2.

Moreover, the effects of blended learning on language skills have been widely investigated (e.g. Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour, 2017; Lam, 2017). The study by Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour (2017) examined the effect of blended learning on the reading proficiency of Iranian EFL learners. A quasi-experimental design was carried out with 60 intermediate-level Iranian EFL learners who were randomly assigned to two groups. The control group received traditional classroom instruction in General English, whereas the experimental group received classroom instruction in General English including blended instruction in the reading skills. Both groups were tested for their reading skills before and after the treatment using the reading section of the Preliminary English Test and their scores were compared. The independent t-test results indicated that blended learning had a statistically significant positive effect on the reading proficiency of Iranian EFL learners. The study also suggested that blended learning can be adopted in the English language classes to facilitate the learning process especially that of the reading skills.

Most of the previous studies mostly indicated positive outcomes of blended learning, so most readers would easily believe that this environment is good for language learning. However, it should be pointed out that learners may have various attitudes towards, perceptions of, experiences in, and preferences for certain learning environments. Questions regarding how particular learners experience in blended

learning remained to be answered. On the top of that, there is still a need for qualitative findings to achieve a fuller understanding of how blended language learning is experienced and how such experience help inform the quality of this environment for language learning and teaching. The present study therefore tried to fill these gaps.

Method

A convenience sampling method was employed to collect prospective participants. Out of 215 first-year students of my main study (Chotipaktanasook, in press), 12 were randomly selected for qualitative views. There were seven females and five males, aged between 18 and 20 years old. They were from six major public and private institutions in Thailand, which were active in blended language learning programs. Participants' experiences were elicited through a semi-structured f2f interview which was conducted when they had experienced blended learning employed in their English courses for a one-year period. The semi-structured interview type was chosen in the present study because the format is open-ended and allows both the interviewer to have freedom to digress and probe for more information (Mackey & Grass, 2005) and the interviewee to elaborate on certain issues (Dörnyei, 2007), thus increasing validity. The interview questions were developed in line with the strategy of discovering experiences of participants and uncovering the story behind them. One major interview question was "Tell me about your experience learning English in a blended-learning environment.", some questions were changed and created during the interview depending on the participants' answers. The interview was conducted in Thai and they was audio recorded. The interview was transcribed verbatim and then translated into English by the researcher. Only key interview findings are reported here.

Findings

Participants were asked to describe their experience (i.e. what they did and how they learned English) while engaged in blended learning employed in their English courses. Generally, both favourable and unfavorable experiences with blended learning were reported. On the one hand, the majority of the participants said that they enjoyed learning English in a blended environment, claiming that it allowed ample opportunities to develop their English skills. One participant noted, "*I learned a lot of new vocabulary and took opportunities to practice the language beyond the classroom.*" Another participant further supported, "*I added comments in Google Classroom to ask questions and express opinions, allowing me to practice writing and basic grammar.*"

Moreover, the participants also felt that they could develop language learning strategies and learning skills in a blended environment, especially meta-cognitive strategies (i.e. planning), affective strategies (i.e. building confidence), social strategies (i.e. cooperating with other learners), and necessary twenty-first century learning skills (i.e. digital literacy skills). One participant reported that she usually worked more with other students in blended learning. Another participant supported that this allowed her to work without the teacher's assistance and commented "strategies and skills developed from blended learning helped me become more independent learners."

On the other hand, some participants claimed that they did not find blended learning enjoyable and did not consider their experiences with this learning environment useful. Due to their low English proficiency level, self-directed learning skills, and computer skills, they often pointed out that they experienced certain level of frustration, particularly when facing language and technical problems. One participant said that they were unprepared for blended learning participation. Another participant commented: *"Some tasks were too difficult and boring to learn on my own. Although I liked the concept of flexibility and the advantages when I was unable to attend classes, I struggled with trying to understand a particular lesson, especially the one that was new to me and the one that was not relevant to what I had learned in class. I felt lost when working at home alone. I also felt upset when I finished an assigned task, but the online system failed to record my performance. I think my enthusiasm was affected by the frustration I had in blended learning."*

Conclusion and Discussion

This study has dealt with Thai university EFL students' experiences with blended learning used in their language courses. Overall, both favourable and unfavourable experiences were reported. Learners in this study noted the clear benefits of their experiences in blended learning in providing an environment for the development of language skills, language learning strategies, and learning skills. This suggests that when well implemented, blended learning has the potential to enhance language learning (Marsh, 2012). Like the implementation of new methods, learning environments, or technologies, simply adding them to traditional f2f classroom might not be sufficient for language teachers to exploit the potential of blended learning. This has several implications for teaching practice. The most important implication is that teachers should learn more how to achieve an effective blend and be able to select appropriate

technology and design appropriate tasks. Students' negative experiences with blended learning should be taken more seriously by the teachers and the institutions because some students might believe that blended learning is less effective than f2f learning. Major problems of blended learning reported here are learners' readiness and their strong feeling of frustration. Therefore, there should be learner training in four aspects: psychological, technical, pedagogical, and learning strategies, and teachers should have competence in conducting blended learning to make blended language learning succeed. These implications can help promote positive learning experiences and create supportive learning opportunities for language learners. In addition, these should be key concerns for tertiary education institutions to run blended language courses smoothly.

Suggestions for Future Research

Convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants from only six universities in Thailand, and this has its limitations since they may not be representative of the entire population. Their experiences of blended learning deserve further attention and investigation in both theoretical and practical aspects so that the findings can be more meaningful and generalised to other contexts. Future studies using larger populations are therefore required.

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The Researcher History

Name	Nuttakritta Chotipaktanasook
Address	140/1-4 Dhurakij Pundit University, Prachachuen Road, Bangkok, Thailand, 10210
Contact number	+662 954 7300 ext. 274
E- mail Address	nuttakritta.cho@dpu.ac.th

Education History

Bachelor Degree	Bachelor of Arts (English for Business Communication, 1 st Class Honors) Sripatum University, Thailand
Master Degree	Master of Arts (Language and Communication) National Institute of Development and Administration, Thailand
Doctoral Degree	Doctor of Philosophy (Education) University of Canterbury, New Zealand