Exploring University Students' Attitudes and Strategies in a Blended English Language Learning Environment

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Abstract

Since the attitudes and strategies of students are important aspects in building a new language learning environment, this paper aims to investigate students' attitudes and strategies in a blended English language learning environment in which the face-to-face instruction and online activities are incorporated. A survey questionnaire was administered to undergraduate students in order to explore their attitudes towards blended leaning activities and the strategies used to achieve the learning goals. The results reveal that participating students are positive and motivated in learning English through online activities. Participants also find the blended language learning activities convenient and promoting self-directed learning. Online activities allow students to have more control in learning and feel more responsible to practice the language. Although blended learning instruction and online activities have the potential to promote autonomous language learning, teachers' guidance and assistance from peers are required.

Keywords: Blended learning environment, Blended language learning, Students' attitudes, Students' strategies

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1. Introduction

Being English teachers in the Information age in a Thai tertiary context, we strongly believe that it is necessary to adjust our lessons to fit into the current situation of using language in virtual environments as well as to answer students' need to practice the target language is such area. Since Information Communication Technology (ICT) offers a wide range of language input, multimedia, materials, and resources for both students and teachers, it has the potential to afford different styles of learning and teaching (Healey, 2002). Acknowledging this, an academic reading course was designed to accommodate both face-to-face (f2f) instruction and online instruction in which students were given the opportunity to learn in a contact class and through technology in order to make them realize that English language learning is not limited within the classroom. A blended learning environment was created by the use of a variety of materials and resources to practice academic English as well as giving students opportunities to learn from online resources at their convenience.

In a review of literature in Blended Learning (BL) and language instruction, a variety of delivery methods plays a major role in enhancing students' self-directed learning and boosting language learners' autonomy and motivation (Blake, 2008; Ushioda, 2000). However, learners' attitudes and their perception about blended learning in the Thai educational context have not been thoroughly explored. This paper aims to find out how EFL students perceive their learning and apply strategies in a blended environment. Exploring how students perceive and use learning strategies in the new learning environment would give an insight to the development of blended language learning instruction in the tertiary level.

2. Background

2.1 Blended learning environment

According to Rosette and Sheldon (2001), blended learning is to combine the various aspects of traditional classroom, such as coaching, demonstrating, monitoring, explaining, facilitating, etc. with the various aspects of online learning. Blended learning has the potential to change the face of literacy and enhance education by combining f2f learning with online learning. It is considered a powerful teaching and learning approach that combines a variety of other delivery methods for a superior learning experience. Mortera-Gutheirez (2006) suggests "a blended learning course allows more personal control of student goals and instructor learning objectives" (p. 317). Instructors can use blended learning to guide students toward higher education and work. In blended learning environments, the learning process is accessible, inclusive and interactive. Students can interact with instructors while gaining benefits from practicing new skills and being encouraged to build their self-esteem as learners (Bryson, 2003). Blended learning offers a real opportunity to create learning experiences that can provide the right learning at the right time and place for each and every individual, not just at work, but in schools, universities and even at home (Thorne, 2003).

A number of advantages of blended learning have been discussed widely in the literature. Blended learning provides an accessible, inclusive environment where students can access course material at home, school or local community centers (Zemsky and Massy, 2004). Instruction is inexpensive: "if a blended learning course is well planned, developed, and conducted, its cost effectiveness is obvious and proven" (Mortera-Gutierrez, 2006, p. 317). Moreover, advantages of f2f learning include using student-centered instruction, accommodating learning disabilities, and providing one-to-one help. Not only that it offers a welcome break from the monotony of classroom instruction, it also allows the students to make choices about their learning such as what, when, where and why they want to learn. Blended literacy classes are convenient, interactive, and accommodating

different learning styles. Instructors can teach to various learning styles as well as encouraging students to practice the skills according to their learning style; for example, introverted students can create online personas and extraverted students can interact with others.

Hence, it seems that blended learning brings together the benefits of both f2f and online language learning. According to Vaughan (2007), a mix of teaching and learning methods is one of the most efficient way to support student learning, because it provides time flexibility and increase students' responsibility by using ICT tools that embrace all the activities of discussion, interaction, adaptation and reflection, which are essential for tertiary level education. This is particularly true in the English as a foreign language context in which learners will benefit form a variety mode of communication and practice onto the completion of a learning task. In blended learning language courses, a variety of technological tools such as emails, chat, wikis, and blogs can be implemented to facilitate discussion and interaction. The integration of these tools is important for the promotion of learning engagement and interaction that strengthen students' f2f classroom learning experiences. With online communicative tools, language teachers can reinforce students' use of the target language in an authentic setting (Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Mosquera, 2001). This can increase EFL learners' participation (Sullivan & Pratt, 1996) and motivation to learn the target language (Jarvis, 2005; Rico & Vinagre, 2000).

However, Sharma and Barrett (2007) point out that teaching with technology in a blended learning environment should be driven by pedagogy, focus on learners' needs, and allow teachers to add variety to the lesson and maintain a balance between teachers' roles and those of technology. In the same vein, Brandl (2002) suggests that any type of technology use in language classrooms should be incorporated with pedagogically well-designed lessons. This suggests that although technology tools are provided, it is crucial to focus on the instructional intervention that benefits English language learning. Again, online

instruction has the potential to provide opportunities to promote reflective thought and deep learning through realistically integrating and applying principles learned. The integration of online instruction, such as a simulation, thrusts learners into a learning experience, increasing engagement and providing activities that actively engage learners to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information while constructing knowledge (Driscoll & Carliner, 2005).

Although in the blended learning environment, activities and instructions have the potential to support self-directed learning and students' involvement, the role of teachers plays an important role in providing the intervention and affordances in such environment. Blended learning settings still require a strong and deliberate role for the teacher in the learning process (Oliver, Herrington & Reeves, 2005). Instructors in BL environments need to provide learning negotiation between teachers and students. In other words, teachers need to evaluate students' understanding of the task and give students opportunities to improve on the same task (Laurillard, 2002). In addition, students learning in an online environment might need a certain kind of strategies to learn the target language as well as to adjust their learning styles and beliefs towards English language learning. As Salmon (2001) suggested, when learners move into unfamiliar learning contexts, it takes time for them to discover new operating procedures and adopt appropriate modes of behavior for a new learning environment. Angus and Gray (2002) also supported that the involvement of a tutor is necessary for facilitating and involving learners in the new learning environment. Other researchers of blended learning also posited that effective learning setting must involve such forms of learner support as mentoring, modeling, coaching and scaffolding. Frank, Kurtz, and Levin (2002) describe a four-stage model for instructors implementing a blended learning approach that moves from (1) an initial mode that simply provides administrative information on a course, (2) through a communication element, (3) leading to material delivery, and, finally, (4) a more engineered and deliberate use of technology for particular learning needs.

Therefore, teachers' facilitations for students in blended learning settings enable learners to build confidence in their learning and involvement which encourages and motivates participation. Teacher support and scaffold learning help students to undertake and complete activities and tasks they might not be able to do on their own. These supports in blended learning settings can be provided through many means and to many different levels and has been the focus of considerable research in recent years (see Lockyer & Bennett, 2006; Salmon, 2005).

2.2 Learners' attitudes and strategies in blended learning environments

Researchers indicate that blended learning will be successfully implemented in classrooms because of supportive students' characteristics. According to Stracke (2007), personal attitude towards blended learning is crucial for successful learning in this new environment. Previous studies have reported that students' attitudes and responsibilities are key components of effectiveness in a blended learning environment (Banados, 2006; Blake, 2007; Winke & Goertler, 2008). Sagarra and Zapata (2008) investigated the attitudes of 245 Spanish learners towards online homework used in classroom instruction. The result revealed that learners found the blended course useful in terms of providing them with multimodal exposure to language input, user-friendliness, instant feedback, and meaningful practice. In a Japanese EFL context, Hirata and Hirata (2008) surveyed students' attitudes towards a hybrid EFL course and found that some instructional factors including types of activities, flexibility of the lessons, and the relevancy between the in-class and online instructions are vital for students to develop positive attitudes and strategies to study in the hybrid learning environment. Heinze and Proctor (2004) conducted an action research to capture staff and students' opinion regarding a blended learning module. The student respondents reflected that BL is convenient and flexible, compatible with their working life, and suits different types of learners. However, they would like to receive more guidance and more structured activities and materials. The researchers suggested that blended

learning may not be effective if it is confronted with students' receptive style of learning. Hence, these studies suggest that the instructional design of BL might play an important role in learners' attitudes and motivation as well as their learning behaviors and outcomes.

Previous studies also suggest that blended language learning context need to be carefully implemented because of the nature of students and instructional contexts. Salmon, Jones, and Armellini (2008) contend that when learners move into unfamiliar learning contexts, it takes time for them to discover new operating procedures and adopt appropriate modes of behavior and strategy for a new learning environment. Although students in the 21st century are familiar with using ICT tools for personal contact, information search, and entertaining purposes. They might not have appropriate ways to implement the tools when it comes to educational purposes. Since the nature of blended learning requires both face to face and online activities, language learners may need several strategies to become successful in such environments. Therefore, it is challenging to keep students engaged in mixed mode learning activities. Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby, and Higgins (2012) report that several key strategies are needed to keep students engaged in the blended learning program. Normally, successful students often use a wide range of learning resources and approaches, including access to various learning resources, asking for assistance from teachers, collaborating with other students, and participation in online forums. These strategies help students achieve the highest learning outcomes in the hybrid environment.

In addition, the features of blended learning task should be well-structured and meaningful for students to achieve their learning purposes. According to Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves (2003), a highly effective learning task in technology-based settings needs to have real-world relevance provide opportunities for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources. While Ushida (2005) proposed that in order for students to have a positive experience in a hybrid language learning class, training in learning content, online learning strategies, and how to adjust their learning styles and attitudes in the BL environment are required. Therefore, it is crucial to understand students'

attitude and strategies towards the new learning environment and how to keep them motivated. One of the essential steps is the teacher needs to take on the role of facilitator or coach students' exploratory learning. When the class move online, it is necessary to provide students with appropriate scaffolding, clear objectives of the activity and, the process for achieving these objectives. This is an important issue for Thai EFL teachers and educators to understand some constraining conditions and instructional challenges of EFL teaching in the blended environment.

3. Research Questions

This study aims to investigate students' perception about their learning in a blended environment in which face-to-face instruction and online activities were incorporated. The goal of the study is two-folded:

1. To investigate the students' attitudes towards activities in the blended language learning environment.

2. To investigate the students' problem solving strategies in the language learning environment.

4. Methodology

The questionnaire was developed to investigate students' attitudes and strategies towards the blended learning activities at Naresuan University. It was administered to 33 undergraduate students of an academic reading class in which students are required to practice academic reading skills in both online and face-to-face environments. Participants responded to the 4 points Likert-scale question items asking them about their attitudes towards the learning tasks and a checklist of strategies when encountered problems and uncertainties during the learning processes. An open-ended question was also provided to allow students to add a more descriptive response to the overall blended learning experience.

4.1 Research settings: the blended language learning class environment

The course aims to develop students' academic reading skills such as finding main ideas and supporting details including learning academic vocabulary and understanding the meaning of new vocabulary from the context. The course was opened for 15 weeks and there were 3 hours of lecture for each week. Each lesson typically contains in-class passage reading, comprehension check, and vocabulary skills such as guessing meaning from context and verb collocation practices. The reading passages contain a variety of topics including technology, energy, environment, cultures, lifestyles, innovations and etc. In the contact class, students were asked to discuss the reading and guess the meaning of the new words from the contexts as well as finding the main idea. After that, they were asked to do exercises online on the class webpage. The class webpage is a Moodle page containing exercises, links, and additional resources which are relevant to the topic of the reading passage (see Figure 1). Students' statistical access to the webpage and their exercise scores are recorded and shown to the teacher. This has enable to check how often and how long each student spend the time on the exercises and keep record of their online activities and interactions with others.

Figure 1. Example of the class Moodle page

The participants were 33 students in the class. They were the third year students of electrical engineering major. They had studied two fundamental English courses and one academic English course in their first and second year respectively. The reading course therefore was the last English course for them. At the beginning of the course, the students were told that their learning would incorporate online assignments and exercises provided in the Moodle page. Therefore, Internet connection was required at home or at their flats. All students said that they had the Internet connection at home at home or could share with their flat mates. Students were informed about how to register in the class Moodle page and how to do assignments or exercises online. In order to keep the students motivated, scores were given to online exercises for people

who submitted their assignments on time and had the correct answers. The questionnaire was administered at the 14th week of the course.

4.2 Examples of Blended Learning Activities

4.2.1. Renewable energy & electrical vehicles

After reading about renewable energy in the course textbook, students were assigned to read additional pages about electrical vehicles. This topic is close to the reality of students' lives as there is an electrical vehicle service in the campus of Naresuan University. The EV service is for both university staff and students at free of charge. Students talked about their experiences using the electric van service in the class and searched for more information on Electrical Vehicle service (EVs) as well as to answer questions about the EVs on the forum. They formed a group to search for more information about the EV service and find associated vocabulary related to the topic.

Q1: Why EVs are quiet?
A1: EVs are quiet because they are powered by an electricity motor which runs quietly, unlike an internal combustion engine. It uses electricity as the "fuel" instead of gasoline or other combustion fuel.

Q2: What are conventional vehicles? Give some examples.
A2: Conventional engines are vehicles powered by an internal combustion engine. Examples of conventional vehicles are diesel-powered buses and trucks, gasoline-powered cars, andmotocycles.

Q3: What are unnecessary for EVs manitenance?
A3: No more tune-ups, oil changes, and mutter replacement

Q4: Why EVs are environmentally friendly?
A4: EVs do not emits pollutants from internal combustion. The emission from EVs are much lower than those from the gasoline-powered engines.

Q5: What do you think about the EVs of Naresuan University?
A5: I think the EVs service is good for the environment. They are chap and quiet when the run on the road. There is no fume from the EVs engine. The passengers like to use it because it's clean and safe. EVs have been used in the campus to reduce the air and noise pollution. EVs should be used more for clean enviroment and save energy for the future.

Figure 2. Examples of questions and answers about the EVs on the forum

4.2.2 Recycle plant & Wongpanit waste management business

In a chapter focusing on global environmental problems, students read an article about solid waste management in Brazil. After reading and vocabulary exercises, students were asked to discuss on environmental problems and solid waste management in their cities and how they help conserving the environment by recycling. Students were also required to read an online article about a successful story of a local recycle plant, Wongpanit. They were also provided links to YouTube videos about recycling techniques in other countries for them to expand their knowledge and vocabulary of waste management and recycling. After reading the assigned online articles and watching the video clip, students were asked to answer comprehension questions about the local recycle plant and how local solid waste were processed (see Figure 3).

Question: Recycle plant

1. What probably cause the increase of municipal solid waste in thailand?
Ans *probably cause the increase of municipal solid waste in thailand is rapid industrialization, urbanization and population growth.*

2. What does Wongpanit generally do with the industrial waste?
Ans *Wongpanit Garbage Recycling Separation Business purchase industrial waste from local suppliers, and transforms it into usable raw materials for further manufacturing as well as end products.*

3. What are types of solid wastes?
Ans *Types of solid wastes such as paper, plastics, metal and E-waste.*

4. If you sell your old motorbike to Wongpanit, what are they going to do with the bike?
Ans *First, I will separate metal parts of motorbike and sent to Wongpanit for them separation easier.*

5. What is the major benefit of the waste management to the city of Phitsanulok?
Ans *The major benefit of the waste management disposed at landfill sites in the province of Phitsanulok has been reduced by about half.*

6. What are examples of hazardous waste?
Ans *Hazardous waste such as fluorescent lamps, dry-cell batteries, etc.*

7. What does the waste management plant at Rayong do to the municipal waste?
Ans *Generally, The waste management plant at Rayong do same to Wongpanit at Phitsanulok but plant at Rayong was built in order to systematically collect, transport, separate, recycle and dispose of its municipal waste.*

Figure 3. Examples of Solid waste management video & reading comprehension exercise

5. Results

In the blended learning environment, the students' attitudes towards activities in their learning and how they cope with the challenges in the learning process are the key areas to be investigated.
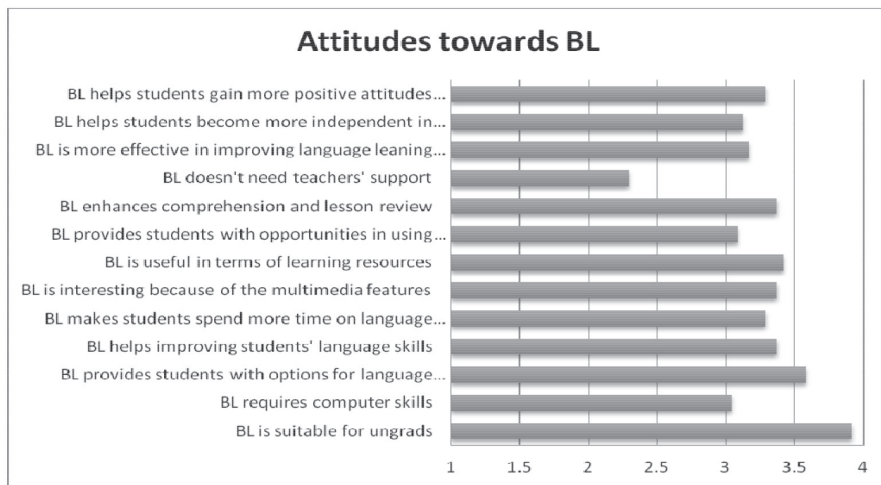
Figure 4. Students' attitude towards blended language learning

According to Figure 4, when confronted with the questions on the students' attitudes toward the blended learning environment, it can be noted that the highest average weighted value was pointed out to the statement, "BL is suitable for the undergraduate students". Students such as those who constituted the subjects of this particular research are undergraduate Engineering students. These students usually prefer learning environment which provides them the vast opportunities to experience learning in technology-based setting as well as learning in the traditional classroom environment.

The BL provides students with options for language learning. This has an average weighted value of 3.8 which denotes that most of the students have very favorable attitudes towards the BL environment. Other important attitudes of the students included: that BL is useful in terms of learning resources, interesting because of the multimedia features, enhances comprehension and lesson review and helps students gain more positive attitudes towards English language learning. Figure 1 also manifests student's attitudes to become more independent and to be more effective in language learning which almost had the same weighed value.

For the lowest rated item, students do not agree with the idea that BL does not need teachers' support (2.3). This suggests that students in BL environment still need help from teachers who can enhance their quality of learning and guide them to adjust their learning strategies in the new environment. Another thing that should be noted as well is that computer skills are not the primary concern for students in this BL environment. This can be described by the increased ability of using computers of the younger generation because of the technology intensive society that we have now; most students are proficient in computer skills.

Generally, most of the students have very favorable attitudes toward the blended learning environment. The use of ICT in teaching enables students to gain access to wider sources of information and varieties of language. They prefer blended learning because it is a student-centered approach and develop learner's autonomy.
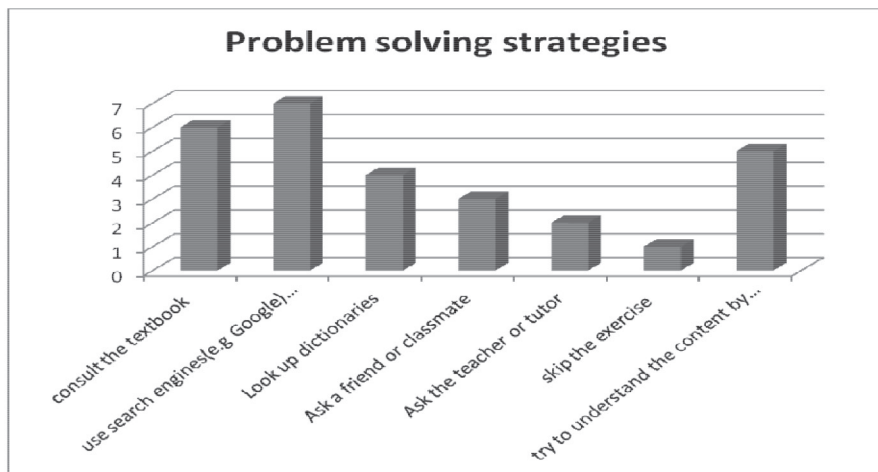
Figure 5. Student problem solving strategies

In Figure 5, the problem solving strategies employed by the students in the BL environment are presented. Among the strategies pointed out, using search engines such as the Google, Yahoo, etc. was ranked the most used strategy among the students. This implies that using search engines was the most likely practice of the students when in a blended learning environment. The environment encourages the students to make use of web search engines from which they search for information on the World Wide Web. Through the search engines, the students are given web pages, images, information and other types of multimedia data available in databases, and open directories. From these lists, the students are given the opportunity to think critically and select the best possible, reliable, and accurate data to support their learning objectives.

In addition, consulting the textbooks was noted as another important problem solving strategy resorted to by most of the students. The students resorted to their textbooks which provided them vocabularies and reading exercises related to the topic. Also, there are examples of reading and vocabulary strategies which facilitate students' self-study and provide background knowledge

about the focused topic. There were some students who resorted to looking up to dictionaries especially for some uncommon terms while some students tried their best to understand the content and instructions in completing the tasks in the BL environment by themselves. This suggests that most of the students revealed enthusiasm in combining self-study techniques in the learning environment.

Since the course content and the web-based language exercises are based largely on current global and local issues, students are encouraged to learn and explore further information by themselves. According to this principle, knowledge is constructed by engaging students in learning tasks that are relevant to real-life situations and problem-solving skills. The lessons contain links to brainstorming exercises, performance tasks, articles, and multimedia authentic resources on the internet.

To conclude, the result suggests that adequate materials and the availability of online resources are crucial for a blended language classroom setting. When confronting study problems, students need adequate options and tools for them to search for information that they need for achieving the language tasks. Teacher supports are also regarded important as students may know how to use computers and other internet tools but in the technology-enhanced environment, learning skills and strategies of a f2f classroom and a virtual classroom need to be incorporated. Therefore, students and teachers in BL settings need to be trained to use the available tools and technology as well as online pedagogy; particularly on how to employ strategies in a language learning process and how to make a connection between the online content, the learning contexts, and their language learning goals. These are needed by teachers who are facilitators and students as explorers of a blended language learning environment.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Students in this group reported that online exercises in the BL environment were convenient and promoted their self-directed learning. Students feel that they have control over their own learning and feel more responsible to learn for the sake of their own benefits. However, they expressed that they still need f2f contact with their teachers and personal assistance and instruction in case they encounter problems in their learning. On the other hand, many of them learn to be more self-dependent when they did not have teachers or friends available to help. One of the students commented that the online exercises were perceived among students as additional resources for lesson review and helped them learn more about the content. They also enjoy using technology alongside with language learning. For these students, technology is no longer an alien in a language classroom but a buddy that accompanies them whenever they have the internet access. Therefore, in a technology-enhanced environment, learners can spend more time practicing the language and be more exposed to the target language. This is consistent with previous studies of students' attitudes and satisfaction on blended learning (Banados, 2006; Heinze & Proctor, 2004). The satisfaction of the blended learning might be a reflection of the convenience and a more independent learning style that promotes students' awareness on their own learning needs and ability.

Another interesting result that students need teacher support in BL environment is consistent to what previous studies have found in technology-blended and distance learning (Heinze & Proctor, 2004; Hirata & Hirata 2008; Ushida, 2005). Students also require several strategies in the blended environment in order to achieve learning task, and they may need different strategies depending on their learning goals. This supported the previous findings of Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby and Higgins (2012) that the more modes of learning are provided, the more strategies students may need in a hybrid environment. It is also found that students expect their teachers to provide them with comments in academic tasks and consider giving feedback as one of the most important role of the teacher in all kinds of learning environment. Therefore, teachers' supportive roles in

students' blended language learning is crucial. Although technology-enhanced lesson is convenient and most students are computer literate, some instructional restrictions need to be taken into consideration. That is, some students may feel lost in the learning process especially when they are new to the blended environment and the more autonomous and independent language learning activities through technology. Therefore, teacher guidance is critical to the blended learning instruction in the Thai EFL context. It is strongly suggested that guided exercises and structured lessons are needed and incorporated to increase students' understanding of their changing role and responsibilities in the BL environment as well as how to seek help from online resources and from the instructors. Blended learning should be offered as a combining advantage in classroom to increase the utilization of online and f2f environment.

Although the advent of computers and other technologies have empowered blended classrooms to be a promising teaching and learning platform, the skills of the teacher and the adjustment in learners' roles should be addressed to offer an exhilarating and totally rewarding learning experience to learners at all levels. A well blended language learning program should be able to cater for the diverse needs of most learners. Further studies might look into the impact of BL experiences on students' language proficiency and other language skill development. Nevertheless, language learning is never an ending process. The motivation to learn for the real world through everyday technology can ensure a more life-long learning success. Therefore, it is highly recommended that students should be given opportunities to explore self-directed learning in the hybrid environment with assistance from teachers and friends. This will make technology become normalized in English language classroom in the same way that information technology has become a part of everybody's life in the information age.

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