

EFL Undergraduates' Opinions towards the Effectiveness of a Blended Learning Integrated Instruction in the Fundamental English Course

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Abstract

Technology in language instruction has been widely used by previous researchers for decades. Blended learning integrated instruction is considered one of the instructional approaches that can help students learn foreign language on their own as well as learn with others. The purpose of the present study was to investigate EFL undergraduate students' opinions towards the effectiveness of a blended learning integrated instruction in the Fundamental English course. The sample consisted of forty-five students who enrolled in the English for Application course at a public university in Suratthani, Thailand. The research instrument included the opinion interview protocol. The findings revealed that the students were satisfied with the contents, the materials, and the online activities of the course as they offered students opportunity to learn individually and collaboratively with others.

Keyword: EFL students, blended learning

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In the age of globalization, English plays a very significant role in Thailand. It serves as a powerful vehicle for carrying out international business, strengthening the economy, and improving technical knowledge, and it has been a compulsory subject for Thai students who study English as their first foreign language for the average of 12 years of English instruction in primary and secondary schools. In addition, university students are required to study compulsory English courses as part of their requirements of their degree.

However, many language instructors in EFL contexts continue to implement traditional teaching methods such as grammar-translation and others in language classrooms (Huffman, 2014) despite other methods such as using technology to support collaborative learning and knowledge construction (Winne, P. H., Hadwin, A. F., & Gress, C., 2010) are proven effective to enhance language learning.

Many scholars have suggested language instructors to utilize the social networking technology to support teaching and learning activities. Ebner and Schiefner (2008), for example, suggest that learning is a social process that develops through conversation. In the context of EFL instruction, technology allows communication to occur simultaneously that enables students to initiate discussion outside of the classroom context. An implementation of a social networking technology, for example, web 2.0 tools, has the potential to increase motivation and opportunity for learning with wider audiences, enable collaboration across

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time and distance, and offer students sources of knowledge from worldwide users (Vivian, 2012).

Therefore, integration of a blended learning instruction in the language classroom reflects that the language instruction should offer students opportunity to learn by themselves according to their interests and preferences as well as learn collaboratively with others via the resources available online. As the benefits of the online learning tools in language learning have been widely discussed, it is interested to investigate whether a blended learning integrated instruction in the Fundamental English course helped students learn foreign language effectively independently and collaboratively.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study investigated the opinions of EFL undergraduate students towards the effectiveness of a blended learning integrated instruction in the Fundamental English course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Blended learning

Scholars have defined blended learning in various ways. Watson (2008) defines blended learning as the integration of face-to-face and online learning to help enhance the classroom experience and extend learning through the use of information and communication technology. Other scholar, such as Picciano (2009) defines blended learning as a combination of online learning and face-to-face instruction. Similarly, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) cite that the components of blended learning involve the fusion of online learning and face-to-face delivery of learning. Moreover, Sharma (2010) states that blended learning requires at least three components; more than one delivery mode, instructor-based training methods that are technologically enabled, and traditional teaching approaches which are interactive, rich in content, and facilitate by a teacher.

In this study, blended learning integrated instruction referred to the combination of face-to-face instruction and online learning tools in order to enhance the classroom language learning experience, extend learning and accomplish the learning outcomes. In other words, it aimed at combining the benefits of both classroom direct interaction and online learning in order to enhance students' learning experience.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study were 45 second-year EFL undergraduate students who were assigned to the researcher as an intact group from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in a public university in Surathani, Thailand. They enrolled in the English for Application (GED1004) course in the second semester of the academic year 2018. Most of the students' levels of English language proficiency ranged from elementary to low intermediate. All of them completed the English Basics course (GED1003) in their first year. A trial lasted for three weeks including face-to-face instruction and online reading activities. The face-to-face instruction mainly focused on an explicit instruction using a commercial course book titled

World English 2, with the main focus on integrated skills from the contents around the world. The online reading activities focused on the practice of reading skills independently and collaboratively which included serving reading websites either from those recommended from the instructors or from the students' preferences, posting the task on Facebook, and giving comments on each post. A tryout took three weeks including three units of the lesson.

Data Collection Instruments

An opinion interview was used as a main data collection instrument in the present study. Six students were randomly selected for the semi-structured interview.

Data Collection Procedures

After all the instruments had been developed, the study was carried out with 45 second year EFL undergraduate students who enrolled in the English for Application course (GED1004) in the second semester of the academic year 2018. The tryout included three units of the lessons combining face-to-face language instruction and online reading activities. During the online learning, the teacher observed students' participation and engagement in the online reading activities. After the tryout, the instructors randomly selected six students for the interview.

Findings

The findings from the interview were presented regarding the three main categories including the students' opinions towards the contents, the materials, the online activities of the course.

Students' Opinions towards the Contents

The findings regarding the students' opinions towards the course contents focused on the interest of the content, and the difficulty level of the content.

The following excerpts yield further evidence that the students were satisfied with the course contents as they helped them improve other language skills:

"The course improved many skills, such as reading and thinking skills. I applied the knowledge learned in class with the texts I served online." (Student #3)

However, their recommendations on the contents were also reported. Some of the students suggested that the meaning of difficult vocabulary should be provided in the lesson together with their pronunciation. Moreover, they suggested that the contents be categorized based on the difficulty level in each lesson, as shown below:

"The meaning of difficult vocabulary or technical terms should be provided in the in the reading tasks." (Student #1)

"I wish the online contents to be categorized based on the level of difficulty in each week." (Student #4)

To sum up, most of the students were satisfied with the course contents. The students perceived that they benefited from the contents of the course. Moreover, the students recommended that the instruction should include more description of the target vocabulary as well as the categorization of the online contents in terms of the difficulty level.

Students' Opinions towards the Materials

The findings regarding the students' opinions towards the course materials focused on the interesting of online reading materials, and the usefulness of the class website as well as the online materials.

The following excerpts supported the conclusion that the students were satisfied with the course materials especially the class website and the online reading materials that helped promote independent learning and collaborative learning, as some of them described:

"The reading website motivated me to learn individually because it enabled me to practice reading by myself. Moreover, we could share and learn from what we read together if we want to." (Student #1)

"I was motivated to do online reading activities on the class website. I liked the way the instructor provided a variety of reading websites which were easily accessed." (Student #4)

Besides, the students offered recommendations on the application of the materials. Some of the students suggested that a direction to the online submission should be clearly stated in order to help them overcome confusion that occurred during the online activity.

To sum up, most of the students were satisfied with the course materials. The students perceived that they gained the benefits from the materials of the course, especially those of the online platform. With the features of the class website designed to promote individual learning, most of the students agreed that they were motivated to practice reading with the online reading activity at their own pace. Moreover, the students recommended a clear direction to the online submission be included.

Students' Opinions towards the Online Activities

The findings regarding the students' opinions toward the online activities focused on the usefulness of the online activities in terms of promoting independent learning and collaborative learning.

The following excerpts confirmed that the students were satisfied the online activities as they helped promote self-pace learning. The students reported that the online activities offered them the opportunity and freedom to practice reading by themselves. They were motivated and comfortable to choose the materials, including websites as well as the activities according to their interests and preference, as could be seen from the following excerpts:

"I could practice reading by myself through the online activities offered in the online platform. I choose the reading website that sounded interesting and easy to understand first." (Student #1)

"Reading websites enhanced my knowledge and made me feel comfortable. I could choose what I would like to read, any genres that I wanted to read according to my interest and curiosity". (Student #2)

Moreover, the students were satisfied with the online activities as they helped enhance collaborative learning through researching, sharing, and discussing. Through such activities, they were motivated to read and share their knowledge and opinions with peers and the students claimed that such activities enhanced their understanding of the topic, as some of them described:

“Online research was better than just doing in-class paper-based activities because we could research on the assigned topics, discuss, and share with peers. I think I better understood about the topic from this activity.” (Student #3)

“I think I gained a lot from online sharing activity. It enabled me to express my opinions and improved my potential in reading.” (Student #4)

However, their recommendations on the application of the online activities were also reported. Some of the students suggested that the problem with the Internet connection affected the accessibility of the online resources, as one of them described:

“A lot of activities were done online. Sometimes, if there was a problem with the Internet connection, a lot of activities could not be completed.” (Student #3)

To sum up, most of the students were satisfied with the online activities. The online reading activities in the platform were reported to promote independent learning of the students. The students were motivated and comfortable to choose the materials and activities based on their own interests and preferences. Moreover, the online activities especially that of the posting and sharing activities were reported to enhance collaborative learning. The students agreed that through the online activities, they expanded knowledge and vocabulary through researching, discussing, and sharing with peers. Moreover, the students suggested that effectiveness of the Internet be taken into consideration.

To conclude, most students were satisfied with the contents, the materials, and the online activities of the course. Most of the findings from the interviews supported their positive opinions. However, some students expressed concerns in terms of the organization of the contents, the clear directions of the online course, and the accessibility of online resources.

Conclusion

Based on the findings regarding the students' opinions towards the effectiveness of an online language learning integrated instruction, most of the students were satisfied with the contents, the material, and the online activities of the course. The reasons for the students to have positive opinions towards integration of a blended learning instruction were probably because of the three main components of the course which were the course contents, the course materials, and the online activities that enhance their ability to self-control over their own learning as well as the ability to learn collaboratively.

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