Learners' Perceptions of a Blended English Learning Program in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT :

The integration of authentic online learning materials with face to face teaching is a trend for second language acquisition. A total of 274 college students participated in this study. A hybrid web-based English instruction model was used in this study. It is a convergence of face to face and online English learning course. Participants should meet once a week for the English class. They also need to fulfill the online English learning assignments after classes. According to the researcher's observation for semester, the results show that the proficient learners are much more motivated than the less proficient learners. Several learners indicated that it was a big challenge to learn English through these authentic learning materials. Moreover, the individual difference makes the online learning achievement had significant different results. In conclusion, proficient learners with high motivation can learn English effectively than less proficient learners via internet.

1. INTRODUCTION :

English has become a global language for acquiring new information and important daily oral communication tool with the electronic-age coming. The importance of learning a foreign language is far more important than the last few decades. ESL learning through Internet has evolved not only in the west but also in Taiwan. As the technology advances, ESL learning via Internet has becomes easier and inevitable. Recently, more and more technology universities implement online English learning courses because ESL online courses can provide an authentic language learning environment. Integrating technology and language curriculum has been the new trend for second language learning. The wealth of information available on the web affords teachers and learners access to language learning resources. A wide range of language skills are enhanced with the use of Internet-based activities, including vocabulary practice, grammar exercise, pronunciation, reading and writing tasks. As you turn on the computer, a great number of diversified learning activities soon appear on the screen via the web. Online learning courses can motivate students for their second language acquisition around the authentic and interactive environment.

ESL online learning activities provide many opportunities both for ESL educators and learners. Current studies suggest that online educational and enrichment activities are effective for well motivated learners, especially those who understand the format and nature of online learning experiences (Warschauer, Shetzer & Meloni, 2000). They mentioned that flexibility of any-time and real-time options and the convenience of communication options across wide geographical distances are the main benefits of online learning. Morrison (2002) indicated that the interactivity capabilities of the world wide web make it especially

exciting as a resource for language teaching and learning. Online language tutorials, exercises, and tests are available to anyone who has access to the Web. ESL online language learning activities are diversified in reading and writing, vocabulary and grammar, listening comprehension and pronunciation. ESL online course practitioners should find a match for learners' needs, abilities, subject interests, and technical requirements. In Taiwan, more and more universities implemented online English course than before. The development of online English course should be localized and individualized. Learners' attitudes and perception toward the online course should be put in the priority while implementing the online course. With the advancement of the Internet and multimedia, current Integrative CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) has overcome the principal disadvantages of earlier types of CALL that was not close enough to real life communication (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). Nowadays, integrative CALL provides learners with spontaneous learning environment.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effects of blended learning at Fooyin university in southern Taiwan and highlight some suggestions for foreign language teacher. Another purpose is to encourage language teacher to integrate technology with their teaching, make best use of Internet authentic materials, and then design a well-organized online course.

1.2 Definitions of Terms

1. *E-Learning* : E-Learning is an umbrella term for various ways of using computers and the Internet for learning (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007).

2. *Blending learning* : Blended learning refers to a language course which combines a face-to-face classroom component with an appropriate use of technology. The term technology covers a wide range of recent technologies, such as the Internet, CD-ROMs and interactive whiteboards. It also includes the use of computers as a means of communication, such as chat and email, and a number of environments which enable teachers to enrich their courses, such as virtual learning environment, blogs and wikis (Sharma & Barrett, 2007).

3. *Computer-assisted language learning* : CALL has come to encompass issues of materials design, technologies, pedagogical theories and modes of instruction. Materials for CALL can include those which are purpose-made for language learning and those which adapt existing computer-based materials, video and other materials (Beatty, 2003).

1.3 Research Questions

1.What are the learners' opinions about blended language learning at the technical college in Taiwan ?
2.Do proficient learners have a positive perception about blended learning than less proficient learners ?

1.4 The Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Learning

With the dawning of electronic age, online courses have gradually become an essential part for second language acquisition. Online learning provides various learning activities, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Use of an interactive audio program allows students to create dialogues to practice them with other students. Students are guided to listen for specific facts in the online program. Diversified writing activities are provided, such as full-in the blank, multiple-choice, and true/false questions (Willetts, 1992).

Designing a course with the support of technology can allow learners and teachers more flexibility both in time and space. Moreover, learners can follow their own pace to review their lessons and read aloud the lesson whenever they want. Lee (2000) indicated that online language learning can increase the students' learning motivation,

enhance students' language proficiency, provide authentic teaching materials for leaning, emphasize the individual needs and enlarge global understanding. Taylor & Gitsaki (2003) mentioned that online language learning programs provided a lot of fun games and communicative activities, and reduced the stress and anxiety for second language acquisition.

Several researchers (Roberston, Ladewig, Strickland & Boschung,1987) have expressed that the participants who joined online language learning programs also had a significant higher self-esteem ratings than regular students. Shih (2000) indicated that online projects in the area of foreign language learning were found in the teaching of Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and ESL. The participants in these studies stated that they benefited in increased technical competence, personal development and language improvement. Although online learning programs provided authentic learning materials, online learning still has its weaknesses and limitations, such as financial difficulties and isolation. A descriptive study was conducted to compare learners' degree of satisfaction with online courses and on-ground courses. The results showed that they were more satisfied with on-ground courses than online courses (Roach & Lemasters, 2006).

1.5 Applications of Blended Learning

As the literature mentioned, computer-assisted instruction (CAI) can motivate learners' second language acquisition and also improve their language proficiency both for both advanced learners and less advanced learners. Ary & Brune (2011) compared student learning outcomes in traditional and online personal finance course. Their primary finding was that delivery method made little difference in finance courses. Another finding was that pre-course GPAs as predictors of student success in that course. Romeo & Hubbard (2011) performed a pervasive call learner training for improving listening proficiency. They mentioned that this pervasive approach would work with less advanced

students, or with students lacking a certain level of technical proficiency.

A meta-analysis was conducted by Liao (2007) to compare the effects of computer-assisted instruction and traditional instruction on students' achievement in Taiwan. The result of the study showed that the CAI is more effective than traditional approach. In addition, a self-access intermediate online English courseware was developed and implemented for engineering students in Spain (Gimeno-Sanz, 2011). The results indicated that the students' satisfaction was overall high. Another example is E-Job100 project which had been developed in Japan (Suzuki & Kuwamura, 2011). E-Job project is a learning system where students can learn English by experiencing in an authentic scenario. During the class, students are needed to play roles by speaking English for their future jobs. The results of the project indicated that participants' responses were positive. Their learning motivation was enhanced and they can learn English more spontaneously.

1.6 Keys for Establishing a Successful Blended Learning Program

Factors that affect a successful online program are very complicated. The active learning, the interaction between the learners and the online programs can create an environment where students can be engaged with their learning (Benek-Rivera & Matthews, 2004 ; Sarason & Banbury, 2004). Online language programs are especially beneficial for active learners. Several researchers (Bonwell & Eisen, 1991) indicated that active learning means active involving instructional activities and students in doing things. The designs of online courses are based on this active learning theory. In addition, active learners are always with high motivation which results in a successful learning. However, frustration always accompanies with online learning because not all of the learners are active learners.

The key of blended learning is to embed e-learning into regular learning and teaching activities, to seek feedback from

stakeholders at regular intervals, and to ensure flexibility of provision, in hand with careful training (Ticheler & Sachdev, 2011). In addition, Laurillard (2009) indicated that there is a need for teachers to adapt their pedagogy to make best use of technologies available to them, in a context where digital learning design should facilitate the shift towards learner-focused activities. Language teachers should develop new skills in computer-assisted language learning materials design. Software quality, usability, and efficiency are all important components while implementing an online language learning program. Designing suitable programs for active learners according to their needs is the priority for a successful online English learning program.

2. METHODS :

2.1 Participants & Context

The subjects involved in this study were 274 college students at Fooyin University (see Table 1). Their majors are nursing and medical technology. At the time of this research project, they take one required online English course for two hours per week. This project will be implemented after the general required English course which aims to help English teachers understand how the learners perceive language acquisition via Internet. It was a blended learning, combining traditional approaches with online learning. It was stressed that the results of the study will not affect their English course grades.

2.2 Procedure

At the beginning of fall semester in 2012, the participants had a standardized language proficiency. They engaged in their online English learning activities after regular classes. It was a blended online learning for second language acquisition. The English online learning activities include listening and reading. The researcher assigned two websites for the participants. One was Randal Cyber Listening Lab for listening exercises. The exercises were divided into three levels. In this course, the basic level exercises are selected for the participants. The other one is adult learning activities for reading designed by California government. There are eleven topics related to reading. The researcher selected "Family" as the major learning resources for the participants. Each participant need to finish one exercise for each week. At the end of the semester, they had a satisfaction questionnaire about the blended English learning program.

2.3 Instrument

(1) TOEIC Bridge, a standardized general language proficiency test, was used to evaluate the English language skills of nonnative speakers. The English language proficiency test divided into two sections. Section one is composed of 50 multiple choice listening questions. Section two is 50 multiple choice questions on reading comprehension.

(2) Two websites are included in this study. One is Randal Cyber Listening Lab

Table 1 : Types of Matriculation of the Participants

Matriculation Type	n	%	Age /yrs
Two-year bachelor degree program	49	17.88	18.38
Four-year technical college program	90	32.84	20.40
Five-year junior college program	135	49.27	17.01

at http://esl-lab.com. The other website is adult learning activities designed by the state government of California at http://www.cdlponline.org.

(3) The ESL online course questionnaires were designed by the researcher to discover the students' online learning strategies which contain three sections: students' background information, acceptance, confidence, interaction, motivation, and autonomy for online learning language. The online questionnaire is a five-point Liskert scale . The higher score means the online learner have a more positive attitude and effective learning effect.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data collection was conducted by the author, with the assistance of several English teachers in the Junior College Division of Fooyin University. After a language proficiency test, all of the participants will be grouped into two different levels for research purposes. The top 27% of the participants were defined as proficient learners. The bottom 27% of the participants were defined as less proficient learners. Then, an ESL online learning strategy questionnaire was distributed to the participating students during their online English classes at the end of the semester. The researcher then compared the online course satisfaction between these two groups. A series of statistical analyses were on the collected data by the Statistical Packages for the Social Science, including independent samples t-test, frequencies, means, and standard deviation. The observation of the online course is for one semester, including students' response, attitudes and the desire for continuation in online classes. Both the qualitative and quantity research methods are included.

3. RESULTS :

According to the results of the study, we found that proficient learners were much more satisfied with online learning program than less proficient learners. Learners' perceptions showed significant difference concerning online course content. Broadly speaking, the average mean of first group is higher than the second group. Proficient learners think online learning program was designed appropriately and well organized. In addition, the participants in the first group think online course can help them learn English more effectively. Proficient learners have high motivation, confidence than less proficient learners while learning English through Internet. Moreover, they have much more interest in the online course content, more interaction with online learning program than the English teacher in the traditional classroom. They also have more autonomy to decide how much time they should spend in each unit. It is easier for them to understand the directory of the whole English web pages after the teacher gives them a brief introduction of the course content. However, online course is very difficult especially for low-level students. Those participants whose language proficiency is lower than the average think it is hard for them to understand the English web-pages. In their opinions, computers cannot give them complete and accurate explanations. English teachers cannot be replaced by computers. They are more frustrated with course interaction and the program download speed. Some of them even indicated that the online course was boring. The virtual language learning environment is far beyond that where the teacher gives real explanations in traditional classrooms.

Table 2 : Results from the Learners' Perceptions Questionnaire

	mean	s.d.	overall
Group 1	65.04	5.73	79
Group 2	44.16	5.65	82
T	23.29**		161

a: $p < .05$ **$p < .01$

Table 3 : Items Analysis Results from the Questionnaire

		Responses on Likert Scale						
		1	2	3	4	5		
	Gp	%	%	%	%	%	m	t
Online Course Content Design								
1. Online course content was designed appropriately	1 2	0 3.7	0 23.2	6.3 70.7	63.3 2.4	30.4 0	4.24 2.72	17.04**
2. Online course content was well organized	1 2	0 3.7	0 14.8	6.3 76.5	64.6 4.9	29.1 0	4.22 2.82	15.83**
3. Online course content can meet individual needs	1 2	0 7.3	0 19.5	11.4 72	59.5 1.2	29.1 0	4.18 2.67	15.35**
4. Online course can help learners have an effective learning	1 2	0 9.8	0 22	6.3 65.9	60.8 2.4	32.9 0	4.27 2.67	16.44**
Online Course Advantages								
5 Online course has good interactions	1 2	0 8.5	3.8 30.5	14.1 59.8	35.1 1.2	26.9 0	4.05 2.54	13.44**
6. Online course provide authentic materials and accurate pronunciation	1 2	0 7.3	0 25.6	20.3 61	41.8 49	38 1.2	4.18 2.67	12.87**
7. Learners should have high autonomy in online course	1 2	0 9.8	1.3 30.5	11.4 58.5	58.2 1.2	29.1 0	4.15 2.51	15.39**
8. Online course exercises can meet my personal needs	1 2	0 14.6	0 23.2	10.3 62.2	53.8 0	35.9 0	4.26 2.48	16.31**
9. Online course is user friendly	1 2	0 7.4	2.5 17.3	3.8 67.9	50.6 4.9	43 2.5	4.34 2.77	13.75**
10. The download of the online course satisfied me	1 2	0 4.9	0 14.8	5.0 69.1	49.4 11.2	45.6 0	4.40 2.86	15.49**
Online Course Disadvantages								
11. Online course was boring	1 2	8.9 1.2	25.3 14.6	38 65.9	21.5 11.0	6.3 7.3	3.08 2.91	8.9 1.2
12. Online courses frustrated learners	1 2	10.1 1.2	27.8 15.9	35.4 67.1	20.3 8.5	6.3 7.3	3.15 2.95	10.1 1.2
Comparison of Online Courses with Traditional Approaches								
13. Online courses are more interesting than traditional courses	1 2	1.3 7.3	3.8 20.7	13.9 68.3	57 3.7	24.1 0	3.98 2.68	11.20**
14. Online courses were more flexible than traditional approaches	1 2	0 4.9	0 18.3	1.3 62.2	44.3 11	54.4 3.7	4.53 2.90	15.26**
15. Online courses were more effective than traditional approaches	1 2	0 14.6	0 14.6	10.3 67.1	51.2 3.7	38.5 0	4.28 2.59	14.83**
16. Online learners should have intermediate level	1 2	0 3.7	0 4.9	3.8 57.3	52.6 28	43.6 6.1	4.39 3.28	10.10**

p< .05 ** p < .01,   a: 5= strongly agree 4=agree 3= Neither agree or disagree 2= disagree 1= strongly disagree

Table 4 : Summary Results from the Questionnaire :
Comparing Proficient Language Learners with Less-Proficient Language Learners

		Responses on Likert Scale						
		1	2	3	4	5		
	Gp	%	%	%	%	%	m	t
Online Course Content Design								
1. Online course content was designed appropriately	1 2	0 1.1	3.5 12.6	32.6 62.1	50.0 18.4	14.0 5.7	3.74 3.46	2.14*
2. Online course content was well organized	1 2	0 1.1	1.2 6.9	34.9 59.8	51.2 27.6	12.8 4.6	3.76 3.50	2.07*
3. Online course content can meet individual needs	1 2	0 2.3	5.8 11.5	41.9 54	38.4 27.6	14.0 4.6	3.60 3.33	1.96
4. Online course can help learners have an effective learning	1 2	0 3.4	2.3 11.5	33.7 56.3	50.0 21.8	14 6.9	3.75 3.33	3.15**
Online Course Advantages								
5 Online course has good interactions	1 2	0 3.4	17.1 23.0	44.7 51.7	36.5 18.4	11.8 3.4	3.52 3.22	2.23*
6. Online course provide authentic materials and accurate pronunciation	1 2	1.2 2.3	4.7 19.5	29.1 54.0	46.5 17.2	18.6 6.9	3.76 3.34	2.94**
7. Learners should have high autonomy in online course	1 2	0 2.3	8.1 16.1	38.4 54	41.9 20.7	11.6 6.9	3.56 3.28	1.95
8. Online course exercises can meet my personal needs	1 2	1.2 5.7	5.9 14.9	47.1 54	32.9 14.9	12.9 14.9	3.50 3.18	2.28*
9. Online course is user friendly	1 2	1.2 2.3	7.0 9.3	22.1 47.7	48.8 29.1	20.9 11.6	3.81 3.53	2.00*
10. The download of the online course satisfied me	1 2	1.2 1.2	3.5 9.3	29.1 51.2	44.2 25.6	22.1 12.8	3.82 3.51	2.24*
Comparison of Online Courses with Traditional Approaches								
14. Online courses were more flexible than traditional approaches	1 2	0 1.1	1.2 10.3	23.3 41.4	45.3 32.2	30.2 14.9	4.05 3.63	3.04**
15. Online courses were more effective than traditional approaches	1 2	1.2 4.6	4.7 8.0	43.5 54.0	31.8 26.4	18.8 6.9	3.62 3.20	2.76**
16. Online learners should have intermediate level	1 2	0 1.1	0 3.4	14.1 42.5	64.7 34.5	21.2 18.4	4.07 3.85	1.84

p< .05 ** p < .01,   a: 5= strongly agree 4=agree 3= Neither agree or disagree 2= disagree 1= strongly disagree

Participants in the first group are more satisfied with program download speed and accustomed to learning English via Internet than the second group. User friendliness is one of the advantages in this blended online class. Most learners in this study indicated that online program is convenient for them to read aloud and recite. The accurate authentic pronunciation and intonation help them considerably while reading aloud to improve their speaking skills. Moreover, the voice system of the online programs can

Table 5 : Results from the TOEIC Bridge Test

	Listening mean	Reading mean	Total	% Overall
Group 1	60.82	71.54	132.37	27 top
Group 2	49.90	58.72	108.62	27 bottom
T	12.93[**a]	11.92[**]	19.22[**]	

a: $p < .05$ [**]$p < .01$

repeat for you whenever you want. In comparing to the English teacher in a classroom, participants in online programs can get the immediate feedback and imitate the authentic accurate pronunciation and intonation repeatedly. Another benefit of the varied online dictionaries is convenient and abundant in defining the meanings of the words. During the online language program, those participants can look up the dictionary immediately through the Internet. They can get not only the meanings of the words but also the authentic sound. Authentic sound and varied online dictionary are the most two beneficial learning instrument for those participants in this study, especially for proficient learners. Language proficiency is the most important factor which affects online academic language achievement.

According to the results of the study, proficient learners can finish whole English web-page easily than the less proficient participants. In comparison with traditional approaches, bended online course is appropriate for proficient learners. Participants in the first groups prefer to blended online course than participants in the second group. Generally speaking, they think online blended course is more interesting, interactive, and flexible. It can save them a lot of time and money. With the use of online course, they don't need to pay money to go to cram language school. However, participants in second group can't independently learn English through online programs to improve their language proficiency although English teachers have given to them guidance about the learning

procedures and explained the course content. The inability for effective learning in online course will make those low level students become distracted. Although online learning programs provide a lot of amazing learning programs and instruments, not all of the learners can be suitable for online learning because of individual differences. Both participants in the two groups think that online learners should possess intermediate level English ability.

4. DISCUSSION :

As the literature indicated that online language learning is inevitable, the effectiveness of online learning program is still doubtable by the language researchers. The combination of face-to face with web-base second language learning is the best instruction model. On one hand, the participants still can have chances of interaction with teachers. One the other hand, they still can use the abundance of authentic online language materials. With the advents of modern technology, online learning is unavoidable for language learners. Online learning provides educational, effective and various activities which are very beneficial for well motivated learners and those understand the format and nature of online learning. According to the results of the study, we should design appropriate blended online courses for advanced learners. In addition, the advanced and well motivated students for online learning should be encouraged to engage in online language learning. Elective online learning courses should be opened for all of

the students in different departments. According to the results of this study, ninety seven percent of the participants have personal computers connecting with Internet. Blended learning will be the trend for increasing learners' proficiency, especially for advanced learners.

Designing and delivering an online effective course is the key for establishing successful online programs. The integration of language learning with modern technology is a big challenge for language teachers. Lack of interest and inability to combine modern technology with language learning will be the problem for developing online language learning. Language teachers should be exposed to techniques and teaching methods which can help them implement a successful online course. They have to develop new skills in high quality innovative foreign language teaching. In addition, results of the study indicated the satisfaction of language proficiency for basic learners participate in online programs far behind than proficient learners.

The results of the study suggested that advanced learners will be more appropriate to participate in online classes than basic learners. Designing basic online lessons for less professional learners will be another issue in online language learning. The online course orientation for learners can help them have a clear understanding about the course expectations. In conclusions, those who can harness the electronic technologies would have high learning motivation to learn language through Internet (Warschauer, Schetzer & Meloni, 2000). Online learning programs are so diversified, that online language teachers should not just introduce the course content. Online dictionaries, grammar exercises, vocabulary exercises, and listening comprehension should be selected and introduced to the students according to each individual learner's language proficiency.

Factors affecting language proficiency are diversified, including, interface, navigation, quality of audio, and technical requirement. Through one semester of online reading and listening, most of the learners indicated that the interface is user friendly. However, the whole English is a little difficult for some of the participants. Most of the online exercise can be finished with the help of online dictionary. Several participants mentioned vocabulary size is expanded by the online reading exercise. Although online course is helpful for language proficiency, many of them said that they wouldn't practice the online exercises when the classes finished. Online diversified language learning activities fascinate the proficient language learners deeply. In addition, not all of the proficient learners are accustomed to online language learning programs. Individual differences had a significant effect on the achievement of online language learning. Online courses are suggested to be selective and need to be carefully planned, based on the learners' characteristics and their learning context (Smart & Cappel, 2006).

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