

Learners' Perceptions of Blended Language Learning Programs in Thailand

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how blended learning in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms was perceived by language learners and how this understanding helped inform the quality of blended learning for language education, particularly at a tertiary level. This study was conducted with 215 first-year students from six major universities in Thailand which are active in blended language learning programs. The quantitative and qualitative data obtained from a questionnaire were integrated and analysed. Overall, the study showed mixed results for language learners' perceptions. Although blended learning was positively perceived as useful for their English language development, some learners in this study were of the view that the environment was not as effective as expected. The limitations and problems of blended learning in language programs were highlighted: the need for learner training, prompt support, authentic tasks, and the teachers' competence in blended learning implementation. The study also concluded with both practical and pedagogical implications for language programs which aim to continue implementing blended language learning and improving the quality and effectiveness of this mixed environment.

Keywords: blended learning, EFL, learners' perceptions

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Introduction

Blended learning has become a recent trend and a predominant pedagogical practice in language education for a very long time (see Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012; Marsh, 2012; McCarthy, 2016; Tomlinson & Whittaker, 2013). This is particularly the case for the mainstream tertiary education which has been moving towards instructional transformation and a new paradigm in language learning and teaching, and which has been gaining pace in the adoption of blended curriculum (Neumeier, 2005). It is evident that blended learning continues to be of great interest to practitioners in the fields of English language teaching (ELT) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and there is a great deal of discussion about its effectiveness for language learning. For instance, blended learning has been recognised as an effective way to create language learning opportunities (Marsh, 2012) both within and beyond the language classroom (Sharma & Barrett, 2007), change the way learners experience language learning (Gleason, 2013), foster learner autonomy and motivation (Murphy & Hurd, 2011; Nahdalení & Dharmawan, 2016), and enhance second language acquisition (SLA) (Bañados, 2006; Zapata & Sagarra, 2007).

Notwithstanding the need for achieving the full pedagogical benefits of blended learning and for preparing students for learning in the 21st century to become proficient blended learners, there has been relatively little discussion, especially in the Thai EFL context from the primary to tertiary levels in both public and private education, about blended language learning from learners' perspectives. Particularly, what is still unclear is whether blended learning is perceived as useful for EFL learning and how learners' perceptions inform benefits, difficulties, and suggestions to ensure successful implementation of the blended courses. This study, therefore, attempted to investigate these questions.

Blended Language Learning

In the last few years, technology has become an integral part of many second and foreign language (L2) courses (Chapelle, 2003; Levy, Hubbard, Stockwell, & Colpaert, 2014; Stockwell, 2012). Computers, Internet, tablets, digital games, and even smart phones have made their way into language classrooms. Among different approaches to the incorporation of technology in classroom-based language learning and teaching, blended learning is a recent development. The term 'blended learning' has a range of meanings in literature, which is not at all a new phenomenon in ELT where each term seems to have varied interpretations. Sharma and Barrett, for instance, refer to blended learning as "a language course which combines a face-to-face (f2f) classroom component with an appropriate use of technology" (2007, p. 7). They argue that by integrating technology into a language course, language teachers are adding value to the teaching.

While the term has many wide-ranging definitions, within the language education especially in the context of this study, blended learning is generally defined as a learning environment that combines f2f and CALL. In other words, blended learning in the language classroom involves the use of CALL for the delivery of language instruction and can have different models – from mostly f2f, to mostly CALL components, to a right balance between the two. The term CALL includes a wide variety of tools, such as the Internet, CD-ROMs, mobile technologies, interactive

whiteboards, software, digital games, applications, and other online technologies. It also covers the use of computer technologies as a means of communication, such as computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the forms of chat, email, and environments, including social networking and virtual learning environments which allow teachers to enrich their courses, as well as blended learning which caters for greater language learning opportunities, not only inside but also beyond the classroom.

The last decade has seen a dramatic expansion in the use of blended learning for language development. For example, many higher educational institutions today are using blended learning as a supplementary way to developing learners' vocabulary knowledge. The assumption that blended learning would contribute to the development of vocabulary knowledge is rooted in principles of vocabulary learning. In a case study, Pazio (2010) investigated the effectiveness of the use of blended learning to teaching a foreign language class in which the f2f component was blended with asynchronous CMC in the form of email exchanges between a Polish learner of English and a native speaker of English. In this study, the effectiveness was measured in terms of the expansion of vocabulary knowledge. The findings indicated that email correspondence, when incorporated as part of the course, could help the student to expand her vocabulary, eliminated spelling mistakes, and influenced her writing complexity.

A recent investigation (Tosun, 2015) examined the effects of blended learning strategy in teaching vocabulary and the students' perceptions of blended learning approach in learning vocabulary. Forty students from two intensive English classes at a school in Turkey took part in the study. While experimental group studied the target vocabulary items through blended learning strategies, the control group learned the same vocabulary items through traditional way of vocabulary teaching. After the 6-week instruction, a paper-based vocabulary test was administered to both groups of students. Unlike other previous studies which tend to show positive effects of blended learning on language learning outcome, the findings of this study indicated that the blended learning strategy used could not improve the students' vocabulary knowledge. Possibly, this failure was attributed to the short duration of the study. As for the qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were used to identify students' views on blended learning in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning, and their suggestions on improving blended learning environment. Although students were satisfied with the blended learning strategy employed in teaching vocabulary and preferred it to the traditional learning, they did not want to spend time studying new vocabulary items outside the classroom time due to their lack of motivation. The most obvious implication is that for the successful implementation of blended learning, the tools/activities should be selected in accordance with learner's particular needs and interests.

Blended Learning from Learners' Perspectives

Sagarra and Zapata (2008) investigated the perceptions of 245 language learners towards the use of online workbook over two consecutive semesters. Each week, these learners attended a four-hour blended Spanish course and completed one set of online homework for a total of 24 weeks (12 week per semester). After eight months of learners' exposure to the online workbook, their perceptions towards the workbook

were measured using a survey. The qualitative data of the survey was then compared to the quantitative data from two different language assessment tests. The test results suggested a significant increase in learners' grammar scores and the results were found to generally agree with the positive findings of learners' perceptions of the online workbook obtained in this and previous studies, highlighting its pedagogical benefits in terms of accessibility to the materials, user-friendliness, and instant feedback. Most importantly, the majority of participants were in favour of the usefulness of the online workbook for language learning, especially in the areas of grammar and vocabulary acquisition.

While most of the previous studies have presented positive findings of how language learners felt about blended learning, which appears to convince the reader that it is a satisfying learning environment for language learning process, any challenges faced when studying online remain to be answered. Accordingly, Sun's (2014) study, for instance, focused entirely on the difficulties that confronted online language learners, as well as the way they had adapted to fully online learning environment. The author surveyed 46 learners. Both quantitative and qualitative findings obtained from a questionnaire revealed 6 major difficulties: 1) following the schedule and studying regularly, getting hold of classmates and finding suitable time to work together, 3) pairing/teaming up and working collaboratively, 4) ensuring constant engagement with the class, 5) keeping self-motivated and being self-directed learner, and 6) socializing.

Another study (Bueno-Alastuey & Pérez, 2014) investigated students' perceptions of the usefulness of technology in all the language skills and aspects in an EFL blended course with a full degree of technology integration and compared these perceptions to those of students of a Spanish as a Second Language blended course with a lower level of technology integration. In general, the study showed that both groups of students had not previously used technology much for language learning, that their responses varied, depending on use of technology in their language courses, and that students with an increased use of technology in their courses appeared to realize both its potential for productive skills (i.e. speaking and writing) and its drawbacks. Additionally, the perceived usefulness of technology for skills and different areas of language varied. In other words, students who had used technology less in their course considered technology the most useful for some aspects of language (i.e. grammar and vocabulary), followed by receptive skills (i.e. reading and listening), and the least useful for the development of pronunciation and productive skills. Nevertheless, students who had used technology more in their course found the technology slightly useful for language aspects and receptive skills, but highly helpful for their improvement of pronunciation and productive skills. Based on the students' generally positive perceptions of the usefulness of technology, the study encouraged technology integration in language classrooms and suggested including particular training to reduce the number of students rejecting the use of technology.

Ja'ashan (2015) conducted a study of learners' perceptions and attitudes towards a blended English course at University of Bisha. The study attempted to identify the perceptions and attitudes that blended learning can provide to students' learning experiences and to investigate negative impressions of blended English courses from their perspectives. A questionnaire was administered to students of English department from eight levels of an undergraduate program, and 130 responded. The study revealed learners' positive perceptions and attitudes towards blended learning.

The study also concluded that blended learning is as effective as face to face learning in developing and improving knowledge and skills. However, the results reflected students' negative impressions in some points: waste of time, easy cheating and social isolation.

Blended learning is an area of interest for many researchers from various domains and empirical studies have indicated that it has the potential of achieving better language learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the body of the literature on blended learning in language education, especially for language programs at the tertiary level in the EFL contexts such as Thailand (the setting for this study), is still insufficient, and further research is, thus, required in ELT contexts (Tomlinson & Whittaker, 2013). In addition, most studies in EFL tertiary education have focused on examining the superiority of blended language learning compared to traditional f2f instruction (Gleason, 2013) and suggested the effectiveness of the newer environment on learning outcomes. However, it has been often argued that technology alone cannot create a successful blended language learning environment. In fact, the successful implementation of new learning environments incorporating technology, like in the case of blended learning, should be also based on the understanding of learners' perceptions (Hong & Samimy, 2010; Jamieson, Chapelle, & Preiss, 2005; Pardo-Ballester, 2012; Sun, 2014). Learners must be included and their perspectives need to be investigated because they are 'the most important participants in the online learning adventure' (Sun, 2014, p. 19) and 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' perspectives, it would be difficult to create new and effective language learning environments. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate how learners perceive blended learning in their language courses so that we can determine benefits and limitations and find practical suggestions for successful blended learning design and implementation.

Research Methodology

Research questions

This study sought to investigate the use of blended learning in EFL courses at a tertiary level in Thailand, with the predominant focus on learners' perspectives. The objective of this study was twofold: 1) to investigate how Thai EFL learners at the tertiary level think about blended language learning courses, and 2) to determine how they see the benefits and limitations of this learning environment, its impact on their language learning practice, and how to promote effective implementation of blending courses. To achieve this, the present study posed the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do learners perceive blended learning in English courses?
- RQ2: How do learners' perceptions inform the benefits, limitations, and suggestions for effective implementation of blended learning in English courses?

Research settings and participants

Blended learning is substantially emphasised in Higher Education in Thailand. To respond the requirement, at the time of the study, six major public and private

institutions in Thailand, which are active in blended language learning programmes, were involved. Each institution offers two English foundation courses in the first year of the university education. Each course meets twice a week for 3 hours for 15 weeks. Moreover, each institution is similar in that approximately 1,000-1,200 first year students are enrolled in these foundation courses. Their EFL programs have developed substantial blended language learning environments where CALL (i.e. any form of online technologies for language learning) is utilized as an online component of the language courses. Their English programs use commercial textbooks with companion online workbook components. These are designed for blended learning in a variety of implementation models: a) students are required to study part of a lesson online to prepare for f2f instruction, b) students are required to do some lessons (e.g. speaking, pronunciation) in class and others (e.g. grammar, vocabulary) online either in the classroom or computer lab, c) students are required to study whole lessons online and then attend class to put what they have learned into practice in f2f instruction, d) students are provided with additional practice in online formats for their self-study outside class. Since blended learning in this study refers to a combination of f2f and online components, the courses selected had to be blended according to the definition. Courses that are fully online and courses that only employ educational technologies which are not web-based (e.g. lectures with PowerPoint slides) were eliminated.

A convenience sampling method was used to collect prospective participants. The study was carried out with 215 students with different majors and mixed proficiency levels and computer skills, ranging in age from 18 to 20 years old. 120 students were female and the rest were male. They indicated they had little experience with blended learning prior to their university program. They enrolled in the first year of undergraduate English foundation courses, for two consecutive terms of one academic year. Informed consent was obtained, and no incentive was offered. The participants were selected for this study because they were being engaged in a blended language program, and the results of the study would therefore be more valid.

Instruments

The questionnaire was distributed to participants at the end of the second semester when they had experienced blended learning for a one-year period. The initial questionnaire was informed by information retrieved from the literature review. It was then refined by piloting with a group of university students. Participants were asked about their background (e.g. major, computer skills, and experience with blended language courses) and their perceptions of blended EFL courses. In each question item, participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses and give comments. The quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire were integrated and analysed.

Findings

Quantitative data: Learners' perceptions of blended learning in English courses

Data gathered here suggests that participants generally acknowledged that blended learning in their EFL programs have positive effects on the development of their English skills ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .28$). They reported their improvement in their reading

skills, listening skills, and pronunciation as a result of blended language learning, with the mean of 3.36 ($SD = .76$), 4.06 ($SD = .78$), and 3.86 ($SD = .68$), respectively. They also agreed that they have more exposure to new vocabulary ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .75$) and more opportunities for vocabulary building ($M = 4.57$, $SD = .50$) and vocabulary use ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .58$). Interestingly, they felt that blended learning is more effective than a single mode of f2f English instruction ($M = 3.77$, $SD = .39$), and that they would like their English lessons to be blended with online components ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .75$). They were also enthusiastic about the blended courses ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .77$).

However, the questionnaire responses revealed some uncertainty among the participants when they were asked if blended learning allows them to develop writing skills ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .82$), speaking skills ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .88$), and grammar ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .55$). Participants were also quite skeptical of the effectiveness of blended learning in terms of the access to authentic materials ($M = 2.83$, $SD = .79$) and the online content/instructional materials that suit individual learners' interest ($M = 2.76$, $SD = .97$). Despite positive responses, participants appeared to exhibit their lower motivation in online participation ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .88$) when they familiarize themselves with a blended learning environment.

Qualitative data: Benefits, limitations, and suggestions for effective implementation of blended learning in English courses

Five important advantages were reported in the written response section. The most frequently stated was that EFL learners in this study could learn more new words and enjoyed the availability of tasks (such as pronunciation and vocabulary practice) which are normally limited in a classroom setting. They also appreciated the pedagogical advantage of blended learning in providing opportunities for flexible learning, potential increased autonomous learning, and further language learning opportunities at any time. According to the written comments, an online component was considered useful in previewing and reviewing the lesson because they could work at their own pace, and practice what they needed to improve an unlimited number of times. Another reported advantage was the development of students' computer and Internet skills enhanced while taking part in the online component.

Although blended learning was positively perceived as useful for their language learning, some learners said that their blended course was not as effective as expected. The analysis of the written response revealed that blended learning was perceived by many participants to be interesting and frustrating at the same time. Some commented that they did not have much motivation for blended learning due to their preference to traditional f2f instruction and the quality of online tasks and materials which were deemed difficult, boring, and inappropriate and irrelevant to the lesson. In addition, a number of participants reported a sense of isolation when working online without interaction with the teacher and other students. When it comes to technologies used in a blended course, the findings demonstrated that features, convenience, and user friendliness were considered as significant factors. Furthermore, low English proficiency level, unpreparedness for an online component, and technical problems (such as poor computer facilities and lack of IT support) were common concerns. Some participants claimed they did not receive clear directions and guidelines from their teachers, thus finding it even more difficult to independently participate in blended courses. They also felt disappointed when their teachers told them that

blended learning is the responsibility of the learners and assumed that all students do not require training because they already have necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies to support their learning with technology. One student said, “*Although I can use certain technologies, I am not confident in exploiting them for language learning.*”

When asked how a blended language course can be improved, the majority suggested providing proper training for both learners and the teachers so that the former can effectively use tools and resources and successfully learn in a blended course, and that the latter can build competence and confidence in conducting a blended course. Other suggestions included the reduction in blended-learning hours, the use of more authentic, interesting tasks and the provision of synchronous communication tools, such as social network sites, for feedback and prompt support.

Conclusions and Implications

This study has dealt with the voices of Thai EFL university students on blended learning. It primarily aimed at examining their perceptions of blended language courses in order to understand how they perceived blended learning for their language learning and how their perceptions informed benefits, difficulties, and suggestions to ensure successful design and implementation of the blended learning programs, particularly in EFL contexts.

Most of the previous studies with the focus on learners’ attitude toward, perception of, or performance in, a f2f instruction with the use of CALL are overwhelmingly positive (e.g. Lai & Gu, 2011; Nguyen, 2011; Yang, 2011). Nonetheless, the present study has clearly provided mixed findings including both favourable and unfavourable views. The quantitative findings indicated that blended learning, when well implemented, had the potential to become a useful learning environment and create effective opportunities for language learning. However, some of EFL students in this study found taking blended courses challenging. The reasons were usually related to difficulty in maintaining motivation and the feelings of frustration and isolation of the online learning experience as part of their blended courses. Moreover, the qualitative results can provide a basis for the improvements of blended learning programs. Learner training and prompt support, appropriate tasks and blend of technology, and the teachers’ competence in blended learning implementation can make blended language learning succeed, and these should be key concerns for tertiary education institutions to run blended language courses smoothly.

It is evident from this study that not all language learners received all the benefits of blended language learning programs. This indicates considerable practical and pedagogical demands on language teachers. Perhaps, the most obvious is that teachers should be aware that there are other factors to be taken into consideration: learners’ proficiency level, computer skills, individual differences in language learning, and the quality of instructional materials, learning experience and language learning technologies, which can affect learners’ perceptions of blended EFL courses as well as their interest, motivation, engagement, and commitment. At the pedagogical level, blended language programs require the ability of teachers to effectively use technological tools in their blended courses for online instruction delivery, online interaction, digital material development, and, perhaps, online assessment.

Assistance and guidance from the teachers might broaden learners' confidence in learning with technology, making the learning experience in blended courses more rewarding since both language and computer skills are simultaneously enhanced. However, it is possible that the novelty of the online component in a blended course will gradually disappear when students are more familiar with it. Lee and Im (Lee & Im, 2006) found in their investigation of university-level learners in Korea that although students were generally positive about blended learning, over time students become less satisfied with it and spend less time studying. Blended language courses thus require teachers' ability to design instructional activities that enhance students' language skills, motivation and autonomous learning, as well as give them the opportunity to work collaboratively and extend their time on tasks, tapping into their interest, needs, skills, and abilities in blended learning. This also applies at the practical level, in terms of the ability to select appropriate online materials. According to Reinders (2012), it is the teachers' responsibility to determine the relevance and appropriacy of learning resources and find ways to package them together with appropriate instructions and support. The most obvious implication is that for the successful implementation of blended learning, as pedagogy is evolving, teachers' roles should be changed to a facilitator of learning both inside and outside of the classroom. Specific teaching skills are also required for teachers to conduct a blended course and encourage students to take full pedagogical advantages of blended learning for the development of their English.

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