BLENDED E-LEARNING AS A REQUIREMENT
FOR TEACHING EFL IN A THAI ACADEMIC CONTEXT

by **Noparat Tananuraksakul**

Huachiew Chalermprakiet University

18/18 Bangna-trad Road, KM 18, Bangplee

Samutprakarn 10540, Thailand

noparat2000 @ yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper results from a pilot study in a Thai academic context testing two hypotheses. First, blended e-learning required by an institution can motivate learners extrinsically to learn EFL. Second, blended e-learning can enhance learners' positive attitudes toward learning EFL. The hypotheses were constructed based on an implication that Thai students generally needed extrinsic motivation in learning driven by their authoritative teachers and past relevant studies that showed positive results. Although the quantitative outcomes support the hypotheses, they are not generalizable. Additionally, required blended e-learning may not be the best teaching tool for this group of EFL learners, for they tend to identify themselves better with social media, especially Facebook.

Keywords: blended e-learning, extrinsic motivation in learning EFL, positive attitudes toward learning EFL, Thai academic context

1. Introduction

The current digital era has changed not only people's lifestyles but also teaching and learning strategies. Such changes have caught educators' attention in various fields of studies to make progress in their teaching and students' learning behaviors and outcomes. Nowadays, e-learning, which emerged almost two decades ago, is a popular pedagogical and training tool for all kinds of subjects (Gutierrez, 2014), which include foreign languages (Kilickaya, Krajka and Latoch-Zielińska, 2013), perhaps because it involves trendy and practical technology for new generation students (Tananuraksakul, 2014).

Among e-learning modes, Kilickaya et al. (2013) argue that blended e-learning is the most effective teaching approach due to the integration of traditional and virtual instructions. It is a hybrid model of one-on-one and online teaching (Martyn, 2003), enabling students to be responsible for their own learning (Olejarczuk, 2013). Meta-analysis research by Means et al. (2013) as well as by Lee and Hung (2015) confirm this argument. The outcomes revealed that students performed significantly better in blended learning classrooms than those in

traditional face-to-face instruction due to additional learning time, instructional resources, and course elements promoting interactions among learners.

It is evident that blended learning is commonly adopted in different academic contexts. For example, in the context of UK, Sharpe et al. (2006) observe that blended learning is mostly used to provide supplementary resources through online systems supported by universities for courses traditionally instructed in classroom. The blends aim to include flexibility of provision, supporting diversity, enhancing the campus experience, operating in a global context and efficiency. In Croatia, Žuvic-Butorac et al (2001) quantitatively examined students' perceptions and acceptance of e-learning as an educational tool. The findings showed that students highly valued virtual access to teaching materials because they were given more flexible time to organize their learning. More importantly, they could earn better scores. However, only students who performed well in the study displayed positive attitudes towards the use of blended e-learning.

Since the use of blended e-learning is generally viewed in a favorable light, this paper seeks to explore to what extent this hybrid mode of learning can motivate undergraduate students to learn English and enhance their positive attitudes toward English instruction in a Thai academic context. These two variables correlate with behaviors and achievement in learning EFL (Zimmerman 2008; Kara 2009; Tananuraksakul 2015a). As a pilot study, this paper excludes the area of correlation.

2. The present context of blended e-learning in Thailand and hypotheses

It appears that the Thai government has placed great importance on lifelong learning through Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which can be seen in the recent national education policy framework from 2002 to 2016. To fulfil this policy, the Office of the Higher Education Commission, Ministry of Education, founded Thailand Cyber University (TCU) in 2005. Based on Sombuntham and Khlaisang (2013), TCU has initiated Inter-University Network or central e-Learning infrastructure for hosting and sharing educational resources, contents and necessary hardware and software. Hundreds of open online courses have been developed to support lifelong learning for Thai citizens at all levels. This is the model considered the national best-practice as it was awarded Honorable Mentions in the 2009 UNESCO King Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa Prize for the Use of ICT in Education award (Thammetar and Duangchinda 2013).

In Thailand, e-learning normally refers to distance education that offers online degrees. Although it has potential for universities to expand educational businesses due to its

learning convenience and lower cost, Khaopa (2012) reported that several universities have used it as blended learning along with traditional teaching in classroom to promote students' learning rather than online education. The report aligns with others' claims (Intrapairote and Srivihok 2003; Simasathiansophon 2014). The common use of blended e-learning perhaps is because it has proved to be a teaching tool rather than an educating tool (Pagram and Pagram 2006), which requires a teacher to deliver knowledge to learners.

Past studies into the use of blended e-learning revealed positive results, which suggested that Thai teachers should employ e-learning in the classroom as additional learning support or blended learning only (Simasathiansophon 2014). It also positively affected Thai undergraduate students' attitudes towards the roles of teacher as a provider of feedback, encouragement and learning guidelines in a business statistics class (Suanpang and Petocz 2006), and graduate students' satisfaction with blended e-learning exercises, homework, research and organizational analysis on information management (Nilsook and Wannapirun 2012). Both studies additionally indicated similar outcomes that students concurrently seemed motivated to learn better because they were allowed to access the e-learning materials at their convenience.

In a similar vein, Pagram and Pagram (2006: 4-5) argued that Thai students tended to need much guidance and encouragement from teachers at all levels, even in tertiary education. They would read or study only when their teachers assigned them to do some work or when they had to take an exam. This aspect implies that in general Thai students need extrinsic motivation to learn which is driven by their authoritative teachers. This type of motivation arises from outside the learners, and it can be beneficial for them (Plotnik and Kouyoumjian 2011). The requirement of blended e-learning usage may or may not motivate them extrinsically.

Since English is learned and used as a foreign language in Thailand, the implication and positive outcomes from pertinent literature review led the author to come up with two hypotheses as follows:

H1: blended e-learning will motivate Thai students extrinsically to learn EFL.

H2: blended e-learning will promote Thai students' positive attitudes toward EFL learning.

3. Methods

3.1. Participant recruitment

At Huachiew Chalermprakiet University, e-learning is viewed as an eco-system created under the philosophy of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's Sufficiency Economy and used as teaching resources along with traditional instructions in classroom. In other words, all lecturers are required to develop their teaching materials and upload them online for courses offered each semester. It is convenient for students to download those materials anytime and anywhere and to read them on their smart phones without printing.

The institution's top requirement for producing teaching materials via e-learning is to motivate learners extrinsically. Several structures of the e-learning system available for each lecturer encompass Forums, Homework, Uploads, Key Answers, Database, Testing, Survey, Chat Room, Poll, Assignment and External Tool.

In this study, the author purposively selected all 104 participants enrolled in the English Report Writing class (from mid-August to mid-December, 2015) and blended the university e-learning system with the traditional instruction in classroom. The author uploaded all developed teaching materials, which included course outline, PowerPoint lecture slides and handouts to the e-learning system, so that the students could download them at any time and anywhere without printing them.

3.2 Research instrument

Questionnaire is the primary instrument that consists of three parts: personal information (gender, age, frequency of e-learning access; frequency of class attendance); motivation and attitudes (seven statements reflecting on opinions of blended e-learning); and additional suggestions.

Motivation and attitudes are keywords defined according to Tananuraksakul's (2015b) study. The former refers to students' enthusiasm that makes them determined to do something, while the latter concerns liking something as shown by their behaviour. Although both keywords differ in meanings, they influence each other in that positive attitudes affect high degree of motivation and vice versa.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Out of all 104 students, 56 voluntarily completed the questionnaire at the end of the semester (mid-December 2015). The author employed IBM SPSS Statistics 20 software for data analysis as well as to extract means and standard deviation for data interpretation. The interpretation was based on the following scales and rating:

5-rating Scale	Descriptive Rating
4.20 – 5.00	strongly agree
3.40 – 4.19	agree
2.60 – 3.39	neutral
1.80 – 2.59	disagree
1.00 – 1.79	strongly disagree

4. Results

Findings from the questionnaire reveal that all students are considered new generation because most of them are between 20 and 25 years of age and a few of them are between 25 and 30. There are more females (49) than males (6), and 1 person disclosed his/her gender. Nineteen students attended the class every time, while 32 missed the class around one to three times. Only one person admitted that he/she missed the class over three times.

Table 1. Students' views about the blended e-learning usage.

Statements	Mean	S.D.	Meaning
1. You are enthusiastic to use the e-learning system.	3.5000	.63246	Agree
2. You are enthusiastic to use the e-learning system because you are able to access it at anytime.	3.5714	.65663	Agree
3. You are enthusiastic to use the e-learning system because it is useful for learning English.	3.6429	.88273	Agree
4. You are enthusiastic to use the e-learning system because you have to use it.	4.0357	.73767	Agree
5. You like the e-learning system.	3.3019	.82240	Neutral
6. You like the e-learning system because you are able to access it at anytime.	3.5000	.80904	Agree
7. You like to use the e-learning system because it is useful for learning English.	3.6964	.82945	Agree

As evidenced in Table 1, students agree that they are motivated to use blended e-learning, shown in Statements 1, 2 and 3 and that they are enthusiastic to use the e-learning system at any time and for learning English. The enthusiasm rendering them determined to do something reflects on their motivation in learning the language (Tananuraksakul 2015b) in the Thai academic context. Statement 4, in particular, indicates their extrinsic motivation because they agree that they have to use the e-learning system. This agreement mirrors their behavior to do something, which externally arises (Plotnik and Kouyoumjian 2011), from the authoritative instructor's requirement. The findings informed the first research question.

Similarly, the participants agree about their positive attitudes toward the use of blended e-learning as illustrated in Statements 6 and 7, claiming that they like to use it at any time and for learning English. 'Liking' something which is shown in their behavior reflects on their attitude in learning the language (Tananuraksakul, 2015b) at any time. The agreement is in accordance with the frequency of e-learning access. Seven students said they always accessed the e-learning system, 28 often used it, and 20 used it sometimes. One person did not answer. These findings gave answers to the second research question.

However, Statement 5 demonstrates students' reluctance to agree completely that they have positive attitudes toward the blended e-learning usage because they moderately like it. The neutral level of liking perhaps derives from their preference of social media. As reported by Vichienwanitchkul (2015), out of social media subscribers in Thailand, Facebook is in the lead. Approximately, 30 million Facebook users are active per month, 66% login daily, and 28 million of them are online via smart phones. Through an informal conversation with three students, the author found out that they prefer Facebook because they regularly use it and join other Facebook groups for academic and social purposes.

5. Conclusion

This small-scale quantitative study investigated the effect of blended e-learning on learners' extrinsic motivation and attitudes toward learning EFL in a Thai academic context. The data retrieved comport with Simasathiansophon's (2014) suggestion that Thai teachers should adopt blended e-learning rather than pure online learning, as Pagram and Pagram (2006) posit, so that students need their teachers' encouragement and guidance in learning.

However, although the hypotheses were generally confirmed, the outcomes cannot be generalized because the sample was not representative of the population. In addition, required blended e-learning may not be the best teaching tool for new generation Thais since they appear to relate themselves to social networking tools such as Facebook better.

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