Integration of a blended e-learning application for teaching English at a local university in Thailand

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Abstract

Educational Technology has affected English teaching and learning in Thai higher education. The multi-functionality of a Learning Management System (LMS) is integrated in traditional English language classrooms to create a blended e-Learning application to enhance students' learning. To facilitate the importance of teacher preparation for educational technology used, it is important to study the facts influencing teachers in integrating LMS into their English classrooms and to explore the opinion from students who learn English by using LMS. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed in this study. The results showed that 15 of 40 teachers from the English Department at Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University, Thailand used the LMS to supplement their English language teaching. Most of them used the uploading and sharing documents feature in order to assign students' homework and encouraged students to download learning materials outside the class to practice their English learning skills. It was also found that the LMS facilitated student-centered and anytime-anywhere learning. Moreover, it made course administration easier and helped reduce the cost and time of delivering instruction. In addition, 200 students were asked questions on using LMS, the results showed they had positive opinions toward learning English via an LMS. However, there were some disadvantages of using LMS in English language teaching such as the network and technical problems which were also discussed in the study.

Keywords: Learning Management System, LMS, e-Learning, blended e-Learning, educational technology, English language teaching and learning

Introduction

Using technology to teach language skills is not a new concept (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). However, change and acceptance has been slow to catch on in English language classrooms in Thailand. In other parts of the world technology has been integrated into language teaching methodology for decades (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007) but has met with resistance in some Thai schools. Even though it is not yet widespread, many Thai teachers are beginning to accept technology as a tool to a better teaching and learning experience (Yutdhana, 2005). The English department at Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University (UBRU) has attempted to construct an e-Learning system since 2005. Unfortunately, the e-Learning project was not successfully implemented because of various factors (UBRU: Annual Report, 2008). For example; instructors had limited knowledge on how to use the Internet for education and they lacked the understanding of how to operate e-Learning systems. An open-source Learning Management System (LMS) was introduced to English instructors at UBRU English Department, as part of the e-Learning project. Most of the instructors appeared to be impressed by the capability of the software. The software used to create this online course is called "Moodle". Moodle is a free online Learning Management System (LMS) which is particularly good for language teaching. It contains many useful and friendly tools to create and operate courses (Cole, 2005). There was a previous study conducted on the benefits of Moodle in English classes. The result shows that teachers who use Moodle agreed that an online course helped students to learn at their personal convenience and proficiency level (Suppasetseree & Dennis, 2010). Blended learning appears to be the best solution to the challenges of tailoring learning and development to the needs of individuals. It presents an opportunity to integrate the innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best of traditional learning. It can be supported and enhanced by using the intelligence and face-to-face contact

of personal trainers (Thorn, 2003). However, to operate a blended learning classroom without an organized approach can end with the failure to deliver the related content between the teaching process and online components of the course. On the other hand with a well-organized blended learning course both teacher and student will earn an enormous benefit by achieving instructional purposes.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to assess teachers and students' satisfaction toward blended e-Learning Application for English classrooms.

Literature Review

A. Blended Learning

Technology and computers have taken important roles in our personal and professional lives. They have also been playing powerful roles in the classroom. In recent years, most teachers have adopted new language learning technology. They have also mentioned about a richness of materials on the Internet that help to enhance students' language learning experiences (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). According to Claypole (2003), blended learning refers to an integration of a face-to-face classroom section with an appropriate use of technology. The term "technology" covers recent technologies, such as the Internet, CD-ROMs and interactive whiteboards. It also includes the use of computers to communicate, such as chat, E-mail, blog and wikis. The term "blended learning" has been used in the business world for a long time. It refers to a situation where an employee can continue working full time and simultaneously take a training course which uses a web-based platform (Sharma, 2007). Claypole also mentioned that there were many business companies attracted by the benefits of blended learning because it is a way of saving costs. Employees do not need to take time out of work to attend a training, they can work on their course at their own convenience. Business companies around the world have changed their in-house training to e-learning systems. They also use complex tools such as Learning-Management Systems (LMS) in order to organize the course content. Sharma & Barrett mentioned that using technology in language teaching can motivate students to learn more, students gain benefits from interactivity exercises and they can redo the exercises as many times as they like until they are satisfied by the results. The scholars also explained that the use of technology outside the language classroom can make learners more autonomous. As learners become used to evaluating and selecting materials, they are able to plan out their own use of web-based materials in their own time. This helps them to become independent learners. Moreover, the use of technology can be time saving. Creating course materials online for students to access can save the teacher the time and expense of photocopying. A teacher who prepares and saves a lesson in an interactive whiteboard can recycle the lesson with the next group (Frendo, 2005). The author argued that a number of important factors exist which will influence the use of technology in language courses. These include attitude, level, the volume and type of teacher training organized, teacher's and students' access to these resources, and cost.

The concept of blended learning has become more and more important in second language classrooms (MacDonald, 2008; Thorne, 2003). Sharma and Barrett indicated that the key element in blended learning is an appropriate balance of face-to-face teaching and technology use.

B. Definition, Current Trends and Future Directions of Blended Learning Instruction

Blended Learning refers to a language course which combines a face-to-face (F2F) 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 VLEs (virtual learning environments), blog and wikis (Sharma & Barrett,

2007). The scholars also mentioned that the term "blended learning" can be used for a very broad angle of teaching and learning situations. It is commonly applied to a class where all learners meet with the teacher in a face-to-face situation, but include self-study methods such as a CD-ROM or access to web-based materials. It is becoming more frequent that technology is always available in the classroom and used when it is appropriate.

According to Bonk (2002), there are six reasons why English teachers pick blended learning instruction for their courses: 1) pedagogical richness, 2) access to knowledge, 3) social interaction, 4) personal agency, 5) cost effectiveness, and 6) ease of revision. There are many issues related to support and training in blended environments including; 1) increased demand on instructor time, 2) providing learners with technological skills to succeed in both face-to-face and computer-mediated environments and 3) changing organizational culture to accept blended approaches. There is also a requirement to provide professional development for instructors that will be teaching online and face-to-face (Hartman, 1999). Bonk & Graham (2006) made the statement that future learning systems will be differentiated not on whether they blend but rather on how they blend. This question of how to blend face-to-face and computer-mediated instruction effectively is the most important issue that we can consider as we move into the future. The designers of blended learning systems should be looking for the best practice for how to combine instructional strategies in face-to-face and computer-mediated environments that take advantage of the strengths of each environment and avoid their weaknesses.

C. Reasons to Use Blended Learning System in the English Language Classroom
Blended learning is necessary because face-to-face learning and online learning each have their shortcomings. The deficiencies of face-to-face learning include the need for teachers and students to meet at the same time. This mode of learning has lower flexibility and leads to inconsistent learning progress of students. Online learning also carries the defect that students might be lost in their cyberspace (Mansour & Mupinga, 2007).

Teeley (2007) agreed that blended course design provides flexibility for institutions to engage in face-to-face classroom and online learning by providing students with relevant meaningful content while maintaining student-teacher relationships. The strength of a blended course is to increase student performance and retention, giving them more time flexibility, the availability of multiple modes of learning, a deeper sense of community and greater interaction (Brunner, 2007). The author suggested that the online environment can provide online projects, online work in groups, small group discussion in synchronous sessions, and virtual field trips and videos. However, most teachers get frustrated in designing online courses because they feel their role is being replaced. The teachers' role has been changed to facilitator of learning rather than knowledge transferring in blended learning. The literature reflects that each mode of learning have their own advantages and disadvantages. A blended learning approach by using both modes of learning together could take advantage over others and reduce the effect of the disadvantages.

Research Methodology
This study is a survey research with both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The purpose of the study was to assess teachers' and students' satisfaction toward a blended e-Learning application. A questionnaire was administered to the subjects as well as a semi-structured interview after using the application to learn English.

The Subjects of the Study
Fifteen full-time English language teachers from the English Department at Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University and 200 undergraduate students were subjects of the study. They were interviewed about the topics relevant to the research study.

Research Design
The study was constructed by the researcher in the first semester of the academic year 2012. A blended e-Learning application for teaching English invented by the researcher was chosen for use in the study. After the application was used by subjects, they were administered a questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

Research Instruments
A. Blended e-Learning application for English classroom
The application includes multiple learning and teaching resources for students to download and for teachers to update resources and update the contents. There are two main components in the application: offline & online learning and teaching resources. They consist of a Textbook and E-book, Classroom lecture online and offline in PPT and PDF formats, Audio with listening scripts offline and online, The blended e-Learning application user manual offline and online, Online Exercises**.**

The blended e-Learning application platform
According to Suppasetseree & Dennis (2010), the advantages of using Moodle in English classrooms are: Moodle facilitates student-centered learning, facilitates anytime-anywhere learning, makes course administration easier and helps to reduce the cost and time of delivering instruction. The result of their study revealed that Moodle is a free online course management system which is suitable for language teaching and learning. It is a user-friendly tool to create E-learning or a course online for English teachers and it is easy for students to download learning resources. In addition, it was easy for teachers to assign students' homework and convenient for students to turn in the assignment online. The study also showed that there were several features in the Moodle system that helped support and deliver instruction more easily than in a traditional classroom setting. Teachers who used Moodle agreed that an online course helped students to learn at their personal convenience and proficiency level. Students can download learning material or practice the exercises given outside the class to review their study anytime and anywhere they want and receive feedback to show their skills immediately. The conclusion of the study revealed that all the teachers who used Moodle in their teaching were satisfied with the results after using it. Students also enjoyed using it to help increase their learning levels. Moodle features used in the application are listed below.

Online Quizzes: Online quizzes allowed learners to take a quiz in different forms such as fill-in-the-blank, true/false quizzes and multiple choices.

Creating and Managing Course Content: Related lessons and exercises were uploaded through this feature. Online activity such as listening was assigned so that students could visit anytime they wanted to and practice anywhere and anytime.

Using Forums, Chat and Dialogue: Students were assigned to chat or discuss through this channel and topics for discussions were mostly related to their previous lessons.

Assignments & Exercises: According to assignments and exercises, embedded glossaries were seen as important for students in their English language learning. If students have sufficient vocabulary, they will be able to understand the learning content.

Document Submission: Document submission was seen as necessary for students to submit their work online. This option made it easy for students to submit their assignments. It was also beneficial for teachers to check students' homework on this channel.

Class Schedule, Calendar, Bulletin Board: Schedule was used to notify students of the set activities so that students could plan and prepare themselves before the study time.

Student Grades and Scales: Students' grades and scales were used in the area of assessment. Students' grades could be kept in the system as in the application used this function as self-assessment.

B. Lesson Plan

In traditional classrooms, most activities rely on the teacher lecturing, asking and answering questions, the use of workbooks and other documents such as quizzes printed out on paper for each individual student. Blended e-Learning is integrating online learning technology to replace classroom activities which formerly required 100% of the instructors time or workbooks or other printed materials. The blending within the classroom allows the teacher to better manage his or her time and to focus efforts on the students who are having difficulties. If the lesson of the day involves listening and speaking, the class can be moved to a computer lab. This enables students to listen to the audio at their own paces. The teacher can monitor all students and give one-on-one time to students who are having difficulties and allow the other students to progress at their own learning speed. The traditional method would be to use a CD player to play the audio for the entire group and replay as many times as is required for the group to understand. Post lesson exercises can be immediately following the lecture. The teacher gets real time feedback and can identify portions of the lesson that need clarification or more understanding. Any difficulties students are experiencing can be corrected. This saves time because the teacher does not have to spend time in the next session helping students who could not complete their homework assignments. The inclusion of technology in the classroom does not replace all traditional methods but supports, complements, and enhances the teaching and learning process.

C. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to gather information from the subjects of this study. It was composed of two parts. The first part was about personal information of the subjects. The second part was about the subjects' satisfaction toward the blended e-Learning application. The questionnaire contained twenty-two items. After students read each item, they placed a check mark in the box. A five point rating scale was used for rating students' satisfaction. They are showed as follows: 5 = Strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3= Neutral, 2= Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree

D. Semi-structured Interview

The interview involves a researcher orally asking questions for individuals to answer (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). In other words, interviews traditionally have been conducted face-to-face and one-on-one, with the researcher speaking directly with one interviewee at a time (Thomas, 2003). Therefore, a semi-structured interview was used in this study. The interview was designed to collect students' satisfaction after using the blended e-Learning application. The purpose of the interview was to collect in-depth information.

Data collection and analysis

The data obtained from different methods were analyzed and interpreted in two main ways, quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Both of the data were analyzed as follows.

The statistics used for determining the reliability of the questionnaires were obtained using the SPSS for the Coefficient alpha of the Cronbach formula. The questionnaires were analyzed by mean (X) and standard deviation (S.D.). The semi-structured interview was used as qualitative data. Content analysis was used to interpret the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews.

Results of the Study

The results of the study can be concluded as followed.

1. Learning English via the application can save time and cost in traveling to the learning place, and the application is contemporary, learning English via the application is convenient for choosing each lesson to learn, and learning via the application is convenient to review the lesson outside the classroom.
2. Learning English via the application has no limit of place - you can learn anywhere, and learning English via the application has no limit of time - you can learn anytime.
3. Learning English via the application helps create an independent learning atmosphere.
4. Learning via the application is convenient to download and turn in an assignment.
5. The application is suitable for student-centered learning.
6. Learning English via the application is suitable for social conditions and the current economic situation.
7. The application has compatibility of contents and exercises, and the application is suitable for learning English.
8. Learning English via the application can help getting academic information from teacher and university quickly, and learning via the application is convenient for students to communicate with teachers and classmates outside the classroom.
9. The application has clear contents on the website.
10. Learning English via the application, students can distribute knowledge to classmates more quickly and effectively.
11. Learning English via the application helps learner-learner interaction.
12. Learning English via the application helps enhance learner-teacher interaction.

Discussion

The results from the questionnaire and interview revealed that students were very satisfied with the blended e-Learning. Students agreed that they could access the course and the Internet several times a week both at school and at home because they owned laptops, personal computers or other communication devices that could access the Internet anywhere anytime. This allowed the students to practice the lesson more often and helped them to choose learning on a self-paced basis at their convenience and according to their learning styles. Hodell (1997) supported this when he suggested that different learning styles are addressed and facilitated if learning occurs through varied activities. More results from questionnaire showed that the application helped create an independent learning atmosphere which made students feel comfortable and possess a positive motivation to study English. Concordantly, Uthaikun (2008) explained that students' opinions on learning English through courseware were good. It was because students could communicate actively in English after learning with the courseware. They also enjoyed using the courseware to do exercises and activities independently. Students were also very satisfied with the ease of using the blended e-Learning application for learning English because it can be used anytime anywhere and save time and cost for them to traveling to the university when they were not otherwise required to be there.

According to the interview results, the students had sufficient knowledge and skills to operate a computer and basic learning multimedia which were required for the course. This helped students to focus only on the lessons and not have to worry about the technical system to operate the online course outside the classroom. The working knowledge of computer operations allowed them to learn independently with less teachers' assistance. Students were satisfied with the blended e-Learning because they could communicate with their teachers and classmates through the application. This made students feel comfortable to ask questions that they forgot to ask or did not want to ask in the classroom. Moreover, they could practice and review exercises and activities by self-learning through the system. Furthermore, most students enjoyed learning English through the blended e-Learning application such as listening and reading. This was because the application was constructed for students to learn integrated English skills. The multimedia learning tools should be potentially available for students to promote integrated language skills. The teachers should combine methods to integrate skills of language learning; listening, speaking, writing and reading, and to integrate technology into language teaching (Teeley, 2007). This indicated that multimedia learning tools such as the blended e-Learning application was effective learning tools to promote students to integrate learning skills.

Conclusion

To conclude, the blended e-Learning application was a good English learning tool to enhance and promote students to learn English. It promoted students to learn English more actively and independently because those students could interact in the lessons with both audio and graphics. Students also received immediate feedback that helped them enjoy autonomous learning more. However, the exercises and activities should be maintained and updated by the teachers for better learning in a future course with a new group of learners.

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