

The Effect of Blended Learning in EFL

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1. Introduction

The main focus of this paper is to report on the use of social media to make CALL classes more dynamic for learners. The presenter touches upon on empirical studies that take advantage of the cyber community where 1) LMS, 2) Blogs, 3) Digital Storytelling, and 4) Mobile Computing are all used to teach language and communication. The goal of the study is to examine the effectiveness of blended learning in improving English language proficiency, including presentation skills with blogs and PowerPoint slides.

2. Blended & Social Learning

Blended learning (BL) can increase the options for greater quality and quantity of interaction in a learning environment. Mobile devices and social media are a key for next generation of educational instruction. By accessing digital contents or through connecting with other people through the internet, users can acquire deep knowledge about various subjects. Social learning, a new style of learning based on social media, is expected to be the next big wave to hit the Internet.

There are several advantages about blended learning.

- (1) Blended learning (BL) prevents learner isolation and reduces the number of dropouts.
- (2) Stanford University has reported success in raising students' self-paced course completion rate from a little over 50% to 94% by incorporating the elements of BL through the scheduling of live events, facilitating interaction between instructors and peers, and providing mentoring experiences (Singh & Reed, 2001) [1].
- (3) A blended learning best practice survey conducted by the eLearning Guild (2003) revealed that 73.6% of respondents reported BL to be more effective than non-blended approaches (as quoted in Wilson & Smilanich, 2005, p.15)[2].

The social learning platform "iUniv" has created a worldwide learning community by connecting learners and allowing them to share their insights on OCW contents. OCW can be a source of fuel for social learning. Social learning is also a learning style that connects learners with other learners (e.g., through social media and mobile devices such as smartphone and tablet PCs).

According to social constructionism, people create new knowledge and learn most effectively through social interaction and exchanging information for the benefit of others [3] [4]. Constructionism holds that learning can happen most effectively when people are also active in making tangible objects in the real world. In this sense, constructionism is connected with experiential learning and builds upon the ideas of Jean Piaget [5].

3. Digital Storytelling and Blog Activities

From April 2011 to January 2012, approximately 60 undergraduate students (all native speakers of Japanese) at Aoyama Gakuin University have been engaged in social learning activities utilizing lectures on YouTube. Each class met once per week for 90 minutes in a CALL laboratory. During the course of the 15-week semester, the students were assigned to watch at least six lectures from iUniv. After watching the lectures, the students were divided into small groups and asked to select the most interesting lecture they listened to, and then to summarize its contents and create a presentation using PowerPoint based on their summaries. Additionally, the students were required to create digital storytelling recordings of their summaries for the purpose of developing their speaking and pronunciation skills.

The following research questions in this study:

- (1) Is social learning beneficial to learning English?
- (2) Do digital storytelling and blog activities help students to effectively learn English?

3.1 Digital storytelling activities

Digital storytelling includes the process of story creation with the impact of pictures and sounds, and can be transferable, storable, and accessible in order to create communities where people can share goals, experiences, and teach each other what they have learned. Students can reflect upon what they have learned and create a social network of shared experience using blogs. Software and devices that can be employed are extensive and include iMovie, Movie Maker, PowerPoint, Photo shop, iPhoto, Mobile phones, iPods, iPads, digital cameras, and so on.

The process of making a digital story helps students by promoting better linguistic and paralinguistic skills, and it enhances their vocabulary while improving

writing, reading, and speaking efficiency. Rhetorical skills also can be improved by concentrating on the writing process with a sense of the audience and by focusing on the elements of effective discourse. Digital Storytelling can transform students' writings into a visual masterpiece that is filled with voice and emotion, as well as enhance critical thinking skills. The iPads can take digital storytelling to a new level by making the process easier and even more engaging for students of all grade levels as well as for their teachers.

3.2 Blog activities

During the second semester, the same group of students worked on creating blogs by using the following seven-step procedures to help in developing their language skills. There are 15 weeks for the second semester, and each class meets once per week for 90 minutes. Students spend approximately 30 minutes of the classroom meeting to prepare for their blog presentation, as well as extra time outside of the classroom. In total, it took the students about eight weeks to prepare their blog presentations before presenting them in front of the class. In creating their blogs, the students used the following seven-step procedure to help in developing their language skills.

- (1) Work together in groups of 5 or 6 students to learn how to create make blogs (Week 1).
- (2) Meet in their groups to thoroughly discuss the topic of their blogs (Week 2).
- (3) Start creating blogs with web 2.0 tool (Weeks 3 through 8).
- (4) Group blog presentations are delivered in front of classroom to their classmates.
- (5) All the students assessed the presentation and blogs using an evaluation sheet.
- (6) The evaluation sheet was uploaded on the bulletin board of the LMS, and it enabled the students to reflect upon what they presented.
- (7) Students could share their blogs on the web and assess their presentations for reflective learning.

4. Assessment and Questionnaires

The CASEC test consists of four sections (Section 1: Knowledge of vocabulary, Section 2: Knowledge of phrasal expressions and usage, Section 3: Listening ability — understanding of main ideas, and Section 4: Listening ability — understanding of main ideas). CASEC is based upon item response theory, with more than 4,500 questions contained in the item bank.

Our results revealed that the average CASEC scores improved significantly from 533 (SD=94) in April 2011 to 588 (SD=84) in January 2012 (see Figure 6). The results of 60 first-year students were analyzed using a t-test, which indicated that the differences between the pre- and post-test CASEC scores were statistically

significant at a 1% level. The differences in scores indicate that the utilization of a learning environment integrating m-learning and e-learning helped students to improve their overall English proficiency.

Furthermore, the data between pre-test and post-test scores indicated that the number of students who obtained more than 600 points (full mark:1000) tremendously increased from 10 to 32 out of a total of 60 students (Figure 7). About half of the students were highly motivated to study and finally improved the average scores of CASEC from April 2011 to January 2012.

Due to space limitations we present a sampling of the survey results. The first question dealt with the students' opinion regarding how useful they thought the digital storytelling was in learning English. 80% of the respondents said that digital storytelling was "useful" in learning English, with over 20% stating that it was not very useful at all.

The second question of the survey asked whether the students thought the blog-making activities and presentations with blogs were useful in learning English. 85% of students responded that they were "Useful" and 15 % responded "Neutral". However, it is clear from the overall results of the survey that many of the students felt the digital storytelling and blog activities were beneficial in learning English.

5. Conclusion

As the CASEC data and survey results have indicated, our research showed that blended learning with mobile technologies can be effectively integrated in language learning and can play a significant role in meeting students' needs. The blended learning seemed to have had a positive effect on improving the Japanese students' English language proficiency, including their presentation skills using blogs and PowerPoint slides.

Observing the students' activities revealed that they were excited by using a variety of IT tools, which enabled them to view the worldwide lectures from iUniv and to access a variety of learning materials from their mobile devices, allowing them to study anywhere, anytime.

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