Blended Learning in English Classes: 
Supplementing EFL Lectures with Online Lessons

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This paper discusses the recently developing practice called “blended learning”, which refers to the mixing of traditional, classroom-based learning with other forms of learning, such as online-based. This paper also looks into a case study of a university English course, [Course A], which separated a 15-credit course into 10 group lessons, of 4-5 students each, and 5 private lessons, of 1-2 students each. The private lessons included the option of using Skype, which allowed students who live far from campus to complete their private lessons when it otherwise would have been logistically impossible. Offering Skype lessons has given the students and the course instructor more flexibility in their schedules, and allowed the students to enhance their English learning outside of the regular group lessons on campus.

Key words: Blended learning, ICT, EFL, distance learning, Skype

Introduction

The term “blended learning” refers to the practice of combining face-to-face, traditional classroom-based lessons with online lessons, or e-learning. Blended learning can be used when neither fully classroom-based lessons, nor fully online lessons, are possible or ideal for the desired learning environment. That said, blended learning presents unique benefits and challenges to EFL education. First, let’s look at the general benefits and challenges of classroom-based learning versus blended learning.

Benefits and Challenges of Classroom-Based Learning

Classroom-based learning is the traditional style of learning, and is still the most common style of learning even after advancements in technology. Because of this, one of the main benefits of classroom-based learning is that both instructors and students are already used to this style. Other benefits include the fact that it is face-to-face in real time, and the instructor can bring hand-on activities such as worksheets, playing cards, or board games.

Some challenges include the fact that a classroom-based lesson can only be taught in one location at one time, and a student who misses a class due to weather or sickness cannot easily make up the lesson. See Table 1 for more examples of benefits and challenges of classroom-based learning.

Benefits and Challenges of Blended Learning

The benefits of blended learning include: a more effective pedagogy, increased convenience and access, and increased cost-effectiveness. Both classroom-based lessons and online lessons have their pros, so utilizing both teaching methods leads to a more well-rounded education for the students. Online lessons also mean the teacher and student do not have to be in the same location, which can save on transportation costs.

The challenges of blended learning include: increased demand on time of instructors, and institutional barriers. While a student can easily benefit splitting their lesson times up into a mix of classroom-based lessons and online lessons, especially in terms of convenience and learning efficacy, the teacher in this situation may experience higher levels of stress from having to prepare both classroom-based and online material, as well as spending more time overall catering to students’ schedules. See Table 2 for more examples of benefits and challenges of blended learning.

When Blended Learning is the Better Option

Classroom-based learning is the traditional style of teaching; blended learning only became an option after relatively recent technological advancements. Because of this, many instructors may find it difficult to adjust to an online-based teaching style initially. Moreover, looking at Table 1 and Table 2, it becomes clear that blended learning mostly benefits the students while creating a heavier workload for the instructors. Therefore, it can be said that blended learning should be implemented only in certain situations, e.g. when students are also working full-time, or when students live far away. In other words,
**Table 1**

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<th>Benefits of Classroom-Based Learning</th>
<th>Challenges of Classroom-Based Learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Class times and locations are consistent, which lessens the strain on the instructor’s schedule.</td>
<td>- Weather or sickness may prevent the instructor and/or students from getting to the classroom.</td>
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<td>- Classrooms are equipped with blackboard, whiteboard, televisions, CD players, etc.</td>
<td>- It is difficult to make up missed lessons when the student or instructor cannot attend the scheduled class time.</td>
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<td>- Instructors can prepare handouts and bring them to the classroom on the day of the lesson.</td>
<td>- Learning in the same style may become stagnant and uninteresting for the instructor and students.</td>
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<td>- Students can interact with other students to share information and ideas, which may enhance the students’ understanding of the material.</td>
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<td>- Teachers can implement exams during class time, and be sure of no cheating.</td>
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**Table 2**

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<th>Benefits of Blended Learning</th>
<th>Challenges of Blended Learning</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Class times and locations are flexible, allowing students to study and work at the same time.</td>
<td>- Instructors may be required to be available more often, leading to a heavier workload.</td>
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<td>- Students can study in more than one learning style, which may enhance their understanding of the material.</td>
<td>- Instructors must adjust their teaching styles for online lessons.</td>
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<td>- Students can make up missed classrooms lessons online at a different time.</td>
<td>- Instructors must prepare online materials for online lessons.</td>
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<td>- One-on-one online lessons may increase the student’s participation and therefore understanding of the material.</td>
<td>- Issues with technology can disrupt online lessons.</td>
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<td>- Instructors can alter the material to each student’s level.</td>
<td>- In the case of VODs, students cannot ask questions in real time.</td>
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<td>- Instructors may create pre-recorded lessons (Video On Demand, or “VOD”) which the students may watch any time.</td>
<td>- Online lessons cannot utilize hands-on activities, e.g. playing cards.</td>
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Blended learning can allow students to study when otherwise they could not. Another situation where blended learning should be implemented is when the online lessons can effectively supplement the classroom-based material, and therefore enhance the learning of the students.

**Blended Learning for Foreign Languages Classes**

The majority of university courses in Japan have some kind of foreign language requirement. Courses at Japanese universities are commonly 15 credit hours per semester, which comes out to be just one, 90-minute class per week. This is different from universities in other countries, such as America. For example, at the University of Florida, beginner to intermediate foreign language classes are five days a week, and advanced and above foreign language classes are three days a week.

Forgetting Curve Hypothesis

Hermann Ebbinghaus devised the “forgetting curve” hypothesis in 1885 to describe how memory is gradually lost over time. According to the forgetting curve hypothesis, constant review of newly learned material is
essential to maintain information in memory. In other words, the forgetting curve hypothesis suggests that unless students are proactively reviewing the material at home, the longer the time between lessons, the more information is lost from memory. Therefore, shorter classes, more often, would be more beneficial for retaining information compared to longer classes less often, given the overall classroom time is the same.

One option for increasing frequency of exposure to the material is to introduce supplementary online learning for the students. For example, the instructor may create short online video reviews, along with short quizzes and homework assignments, for the students to complete at home between classroom lessons. This way, the students can supplement their learning according to their own schedule, without needed extra classroom hours, and the constant reviewing can decrease the chances of the students forgetting the material. This is one example of how blended learning can benefit foreign language acquisition.

The Flipped Classroom

The term “flipped classroom” refers to a type of blended learning, in which the traditional method of learning in a classroom and practicing at home is “flipped”, and instead students first learn material at home before going into class to practice what they learned. For example, an instructor may create an online/video lecture, such as a VOD, and send that lecture to their students for them to watch on their own time at home as a homework assignment. Then, in the classroom, the students practice using what they learned in the lecture, and the instructor is free to help the students with their assignment.

Foreign language acquisition requires the learner to actively use the language (output), not just passively listen or read (input). In the case of an English conversation class, the flipped classroom style of blended learning could use classroom-based lessons as lectures designed to focus on input, i.e. listening, making it acceptable to have a larger number of students. For online or private lessons, the instructor can focus on each student individually, and the student can practice actively using the language, i.e. speaking, in a one-on-one setting. Utilizing both group lessons and private lessons in this way allows the instructor to focus on different language skills for both. In this way, a blended learning environment can be more effective than either a complete classroom-based course, or even a complete online-based course, for foreign language acquisition.

Blended Learning Case Study

[Course A] is an English practical conversation course consisting of 15 credit hours over a year. For the 2017 school year, nine graduate students applied to take this course. Those nine graduate students were separated into Group A, consisting of five students, and Group B, consisting of four students. This was to improve the student-to-teacher ratio in the group lessons. In addition, the course was organized to provide 10 group lessons with up to five students each, and five private lessons with one student each. The group lessons were done in a lecture style, focusing more on English grammar and vocabulary, while the private lessons were personalized to the students' English level and focused more on speaking and pronunciation. Ten group lessons each for two groups, combined with five private lessons each for the nine graduate students, made for a total of 65 lessons over the course of the academic year.

Skype Lessons

The graduate students in [Course A] are all incumbent teachers, meaning they work during regular school hours. For this reason, classes in this course are held on weekends and holidays. This presented an issue with scheduling private lessons, as most of the students work late on workdays and live far from the campus. To overcome this issue, the course instructor implemented Skype-based private lessons as an option along with private lessons at the regular campus and another satellite campus. At the end of the first semester, two of the graduate students selected the Skype-based private lessons. The Skype lessons were done with the course instructor on campus, and the student at their home on weekday evenings.

The two graduate students who opted for the Skype lessons live the farthest away from the campus out of all the graduate students. This implies that most students preferred the face-to-face, classroom-based private lessons over the Skype lessons, and that Skype lessons were only an option for those students who could not come to the campus. In other words, having Skype lessons as an option was beneficial for the students who had no other options, but all other students preferred face-to-face when given multiple options. This suggests that the graduate students perceive classroom-based learning as superior to online learning.
Benefits and Challenges

The benefits seen from offering Skype-based lessons as an option for private lessons in [Course A] include: a more flexible schedule for the course instructor, a more flexible schedule for the students, no need for the course instructor to reserve a classroom, no need for the students who live far away to come to the campus, and the ability to complete lessons on weekday evenings. Basically, the benefits center on flexibility of scheduling and convenience for the students.

Some challenges include the fact that the course instructor must adapt their schedule to multiple students’ schedules, that it becomes more difficult to prepare physical materials, and that there are sometimes technological issues such as poor internet connection. For example, a worksheet that can be easily distributed to students in a classroom, must be scanned and emailed to a student for an online lesson. Basically, the challenges center on technological difficulties, and increased workload for the instructor.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, due to developments in technology, utilizing online lessons in a blended learning style has become possible in recent years. While both instructors and students still prefer classroom-based lessons, there are benefits to using online lessons in combination. The largest benefit is that fact that online lessons are not limited to location, and student who could not participate in a classroom-based lesson may be able to participate in an online lesson instead. Online lessons may also help students review information between classroom-based lessons, which may be important in foreign language classes to avoid forgetting newly learning vocabulary and grammar. However, some challenges of using online lessons include an increased workload for instructors, both in terms of time and preparation of online materials. Utilizing online lessons in a blended learning style is most beneficial either when the student is not able to attend a classroom-based lecture, or when the subject matter requires frequent review.

References:


