

Teaching English in 21 Century: A Thai University

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Abstract- This researcher seeks to advance Thai university students' English achievement through a greater understanding of the influence of ICT and its impact on students' English language achievement, students' participation within English classes and student attitudes towards learning English. This mixed method study was conducted using a pre-test, post-test design. Participants were 278 students attending a rural University in North-eastern Thailand, who were arranged into blended learning and face-to-face classes. A course web site was developed for course instruction. This site and social network tools such as Skype, Twitter and Facebook were utilised by the blended learning class for communications and language acquisition. Data was collected from the pre-test and post-test instruments, class room observation check lists, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and researcher's field notes in order to compare ICT blended instruction and traditional face to face instruction.

Results of the data analysis revealed ICT blended instruction as showing a significant, positive difference in student's English learning achievement when compared with the English learning achievement of students participating in traditional F-to-F classes. Furthermore, this study establishes that ICT blended instruction can affect a significant, positive difference in student's behavioural participation within the classroom when compared with student's behavioural participation within the traditional F-to-F classroom. Finally, this research has identified a significant, positive difference in students' attitude after learning English through ICT blended instruction.

Index Terms- BL: blended learning; online learning combined with F-to-F traditional class teaching methods

F-to-F: Face-to-Face Traditional class, based on textbooks and lectures within a conventional classroom

ICT: Information and communication technologies is used predominantly to describe computer-based or computer-related devices and other devices that may be used for information and communication purposes (e.g. computer, mobile phone, iPad, talking dictionary)

I. INTRODUCTION

ICT has been used not only for distance learning but also for supporting traditional classroom instruction and traditional courses can benefit from the addition of blended learning (BL). Instructors in traditional course formats may need to increase the duration of student engagement with course content and provide rapid access to help at points where student confusion may occur. Instructors are creating web-based lessons as a medium to deliver instruction and are finding that the Internet can be used for lesson

delivery as well as for resources that support the blended learning approach. As can be seen from the literature presented, most research findings in this area show that a blended learning environment addresses some weak points of both online learning and traditional approaches. Furthermore, students' attitudes toward online instruction and traditional instruction are generally positive in different ways. Therefore, it would appear that blended learning may be the best approach to teaching English in Thai higher education.

BL can provide students with numerous learning options, with its most positive features being that it provides improved pedagogy, communication, student-centred learning, increased information access, time flexibility, peer interactivity, student enjoyment and learning outcomes. It might also reduce class time and course costs. As such, the introduction of ICT blended instruction may provide a valuable contribution to learning in Thai higher education. These learning options may become more suitable as ICT connectivity increases in developing countries.

In other respects, online course design techniques can enhance traditional course formats, increase instructor efficiency and enrich student learning by increasing their involvement in the course. This may create the impression of passivity in classroom discussions; however there already seems to be a lack of critical questioning in the Thai educational system. One solution may be the use of ICT to support student-centred learning, promote critical thinking, and increase interaction.

There are several studies on BL in developed countries and in Asia but there are a few studies of BL in teaching English as foreign language in Thailand. In particular, there is no relevant research on utilizing BL approach in teaching English in higher education in a rural university of North-eastern Thailand. As a consequence of that, using the BL approach for teaching English in a Thai university may be of great benefit to students as it could inspire, excite, stimulate and motivate students to learn English. Further, BL would open to students and instructors a new world of networking on a global scale, enabling students to link internationally with other forward-looking learning and development professionals. BL should provide an active learning environment and encourage students to be able to learn, practice and reach their goals successfully. This study will be the first in the field on this new way of learning and teaching English in higher education in a rural university of North-eastern Thailand.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is guided by the first research question: *Does the use of ICT blended instruction affect students' achievement levels?* To investigate whether there is a difference in students' engagement in classroom activities, the second research question was: *In terms of classroom participation, what are the*

observable differences between students who used ICT blended instruction and those that did not? In order to discover students' attitudes towards learning English through blended learning, the third research question was: *Does ICT blended instruction affect students' attitudes toward learning English?*

Research Procedures

Permission for the study was granted by the President of the University, the Dean of Faculty and the English department leader at a rural university in North-eastern Thailand. The research project was permitted and conducted with the generous cooperation of the University, and its instructors, faculty, volunteers and students. First-year students enrolled in *Foundations of English 1* were randomly selected to participate in the study. Curriculum program majors were randomly allocated to blended learning (BL) and face-to-face (F-to-F) groups. A separate group of students enrolled in *Community Development*, was also selected to partake in the pilot study (Tuckman, 2000).

Research Design

Instructors of a rural university in the North-eastern Thailand instructed both the traditional face-to-face group (F-to-F) and blended learning groups (BL). The F-to-F group was traditionally taught from a textbook whereas the blended learning group was taught via blended learning. In order to ensure that the students could use computers and access the Internet, six periods of computer training were completed by both F-to-F and BL groups. ICT specialists communicating in Thai gave instruction. The intent here was to explore students' opinions about ICT blended instruction. The F-to-F group then sat the pre-test before the semester's instruction began. They completed a post-test after the course. The blended learning group sat for the pre-test, and then completed an attitude questionnaire before the semester's blended ICT instruction. The post-test was conducted after the course, prior to completing the attitude questionnaire and interviews, which were used to examine the students' opinions regarding ICT instruction (McMillan, 2008). Observations of the behaviours of both groups were recorded over the whole semester.

Research Instruments

These were the course website which was created for BL classes and other instruments that were used to collect data. These included: pre/post-testing, attitude questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, researcher field notes, and textbooks (Dumridhammaporn, 2007; Soars & Soars, 2004; Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2008, 2010).

The course website

There were two lesson plans presented on the course website. The first lesson plan was based on the textbook, *Foundations of English 1*, (Soars & Soars, 2001) which was used as the syllabus for the F-to-F treatment. The other lesson plan was a constructed ICT blended instruction syllabus (Bonk & Graham 2006; Jeon, Debski, & Wiggleworth, 2005), combining the website www.bl-ict-eft-esl.com with the textbook, *Foundations of English 1* (Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Shank, 2007). After the pilot study done by the *Community Development*

program, the website was then revised and improvements made to the blended learning syllabus before it was implemented. The website was evaluated online by ICT specialist Mr Chatchawan Mitarat, a lecturer at Jajamangala University of Technology, Isan, and then revised after his feedback and that also given by students in the pilot study.

Pre-test/ post-tests

TOEIC Tests were employed in parallel as pre-tests and post-tests for both groups. The tests comprised multiple choice questions and were developed to assess students' learning achievements in reading; writing and listening through the student learning achievement score (ETS, 2008, 2010). The speaking skills of all students were assessed through individual interviews conducted by a natural English speaker who was unaware of the students' backgrounds. The interviews were recorded during the pre-test and post-test to compare speaking skill improvements (Nicolson, Murphy, & Southgate, 2011).

Classroom observation lists

During the 16-week semester, classroom observations were undertaken of the BL and F-to-F groups. There were 40 assessment items in the checklist, and for each item the following rating scale was applied: (4) always, (3) often, (2) occasionally, (1) never. The checklist data was analysed using SPSS version 18.0, using the Independent Samples Test to derive and compare mean scores for the two groups (BL and F-to-F) to answer the question: *In terms of participation, what are the observable differences between students who were taught using ICT blended instruction and those who were not?* Classes were observed from beginning to end, with field notes taken and the classroom observation checklist was completed on each occasion (Yeok-Hea, 2010). However, there was only one observer and this may be a potential source of observer bias (Pethrod & Chamnipran, 2004).

Researchers field notes

Researchers' field notes were taken throughout the 17-week study. Both groups were observed to reflect on students learning activities. The research continued a week longer than anticipated (16 weeks) because the oral testing and the semi-structured interviews went over schedule. The researcher's field notes present student-centred learning, communication in language acquisition and ICT use in language learning as described in Chapter 5 (McMillan, 2008).

Attitude Questionnaire

Students were asked to read a question/statement and then indicate their attitude toward the notion rose using the Likert scale as follows: (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) neutral, (2) disagree, (1) strongly disagree. The blended learning group completed the attitude questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Correlation analysis (using Pearson Product Moment Correlation) was used to interpret the data. The results of comparing the attitudes of the students pre-test and post-test were used to determine whether there was any difference between attitudes at the beginning and at the end of the semester (Pallant, 2011; Wudthayagorn, 2000; Zhang et al., 2008). The attitude survey contained six open-ended questions with a blank

space for students to compose their own answers or give their opinions on learning via blended learning. It was conducted at the end of the course with the 139 students of the blended learning group. To report the results from the open-ended questions, the percentages of respondents giving the most common responses were used (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

III. INTERVIEWS

Students were asked six open-ended questions to elicit their opinions or comments, and the interviews were conducted as informal conversations. The interviews were carried out after students had completed the attitude questionnaire, with the duration of each interview being 10–15 minutes (Pethrod & Chamnipran, 2004). Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the semi-structured interview data.

IV. DATA COLLECTION

This study used a triangulation of data by including pre- and post-testing, an attitude questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, a classroom observation checklist and the researcher's field notes. The qualitative cross-validation is achieved by checking the reliability of the data according to the convergence of multiple data sources or multiple data-collection procedures (Goodwyn, 2000; Lynch & Dembo, 2004; Pethrod & Chamnipran, 2004). Prior to the data collection, all students were informed that the data gathered would be anonymous and confidential and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The course website www.bl-ict-efl-esl.com was developed for course instruction and data collection and was available for use by anyone wishing to access course information. Prior to commencing the syllabus all students completed basic ICT and Internet familiarisation (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

During the study students in the blended learning group were encouraged to utilise the course website to search for information and submit completed assignments. Initially, prior to commencing the course syllabus, TOEIC pre-test evaluations of both groups were conducted. Also, a 'Learning English through Blended Learning' attitude questionnaire was completed by the blended learning group. Throughout the classroom observation, checklists and researcher's field notes were recorded with both groups.

After the course, TOEIC post-test evaluations of both groups were conducted. Following these post-test evaluations, the blended learning group students completed individual semi-structured interviews, a learning English through a blended learning attitude questionnaire and the course website evaluation questionnaire (Pethrod & Chamnipran, 2004).

V. THE FINDINGS

This study has established that the use of ICT blended instruction positively and significantly affects student's English learning achievement. In terms of classroom participation, it was found that BL students' contributions, interactions, quality of ICT use, frequency of ICT use, and autonomous learning practices were greater than those of students in F-to-F, traditional

classes. The findings indicated there was a significant difference between pre and post survey results of the BL groups in the three subscales.

The findings derived from the quantitative data; attitude questionnaires and open-ended attitude survey, together with findings derived from the qualitative data; semi-structured interviews, indicated that students' attitudes towards learning English through ICT blended instruction improved throughout the study and progressively became more positive. The qualitative data also presented evidence in support of improved student attitudes: results of students' attitude analysis from semi-structured interviews.

This study's documented increases in student participation, interactions and learning outcomes may all be dependent on these recorded elevations in positive student attitude. When given an opportunity to construct their own knowledge, the BL students in this study became active, interested and responsible students; positive attitudes flourished, life-long learning skills were acquired and shared with peers and greater collective learning outcomes were the result.

VI. CONCLUSION

The evidence-based findings in this mixed-methods research revealed that the ICT blended instruction model produced positive effects on students' English learning achievements, classroom participation and students' attitudes towards learning English. The quantitative results indicate that students of BL classes attained a significantly higher English language achievement in writing skill than F-to-F classes. Also, the change in mean scores (English learning improvement) of BL classes was higher than F-to-F classes in writing, listening and speaking skills. In short, this study demonstrated a positive correlation between using BL and students' English learning achievement when ICT was integrated into the English course. Positive attitudes towards learning English through BL are an important requirement.

It is clear that BL provides flexible access to global resources and supports interaction and communications to advance English language acquisition. The BL approach guides students toward autonomous learning strategies. The use of ICT was seen as beneficial to students for providing up to date information, increasing the sense of belonging and providing opportunities for interactions between staff and other students (Preston, Phillips, Gosper, McNeill, Woo, & Green, 2010). Appropriately, the BL approach prepared students with English and ICT skills enabling everyday life communications, competition in the international employment marketplace, higher education and self-improvement. Consequently, the BL approach is ideally suited to preparing students for becoming 21st century, digital citizens (Sanprasert, 2010).

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, this study establishes that BL presents productive impacts in terms of student English learning achievement, classroom participation and attitudes toward learning English. This may be reassuring to the limited number of EFL lecturers in

Thailand willing to accept and implement ICT in the classroom. Lecturers should be encouraged to focus on the quality of their approach to teaching, using several authentic resources and supporting learners to practise their approach to increase their language competence (Stockwell, 2012). Lecturers of EFL classes should be trained to integrate technology into their courses and must be supported by their institutions through the provision of ICT infrastructure (Vonganusith, 2008). Blended learning is suitable for EFL classes because ICT offers benefits for learning and teaching (Suanpang & Petocz, 2006) and supports independent learning/self-study, which is in accordance with contemporary constructivist theory (Snodin, 2013).

Based on the findings of this study, further studies investigating the problems students faced with regard to ICT skill deficiencies and possible solutions would certainly be warranted. This study recognises a need for further research incorporating studies of different levels of student computer proficiency, such as undergraduate Computer Majors or postgraduate computer science degree scholars that would effectively overcome the difficulties associated with ICT inexperience (Stacey, 2008). Furthermore, this study confronted problems associated with poor ICT skills, coupled with instructors and students inexperience with applying ICT in a BL environment. Based on these findings, there is a need for further research on the best ways to introduce instructors and students to the BL experience. These considerations are consistent with recent research conducted by Ferneda, Alonso & Braga (2011), and Suwannasom (2010) which has found that there is a need for further study on the best way to facilitate the adjustment and adaptation process of instructors and students to a new learning environment. There is also a need to investigate ways of helping students develop the online critical and cultural skills required for the effective use of ICT tools for learning purposes.

Another consideration for researchers developing future studies of BL first-year rural students' lack of basic English skills. If future researchers are to address these difficulties, studies of EFL students with different levels of proficiency, such as postgraduate English degree scholars, undergraduate English Majors or third- and fourth-year English Major Students would more easily address the difficulties associated with language proficiency (Dziuban, Moskal & Hartman, 2005). This is confirmed by the previous studies of Ferneda et al. (2011), and Pornwasin (2012) who note that blended learning should be undertaken with highly proficient students such as fourth-year students or postgraduate students in order to see how ICT facilitates English language acquisition.

Future research considering the BL approach could be conducted to investigate other specific areas of language learning skills such as: vocabulary development, multicultural awareness, communicative competence and learning strategies, etc. These suggestions are consistent with Chen, Shen, Xiong, Tan, and Cheng (2006), Cooner (2009), and Shin (2011) in stating that a more flexible teaching method associated with online learning should be investigated. This study of BL reflects on computer-mediated communications such as Internet websites, social media and e-mail and their roles in English language acquisition. Results here clearly indicate that online communication contributed to a remarkable improvement in student attitudes toward learning English as a foreign language. Another outcome

established in the findings of this study was BL's effectiveness in facilitating English competence when compared to F-to-F traditional classroom instruction.

This study also indicated students' independent learning potential and self-learning experiences were greatly increased through BL because it provides effective, flexible and convenient communications and access to resources. To this day, past and present students are able to access and use the course website as a hub for resources, communications and continued learning. Therefore, the study of website productivity is worth investigating, and further research studying different forms of online self-learning may also prove to be valuable. Beyond that, further research could extend this present study by investigating the effects of learning English by utilising the course website in other institutions or contexts. In short, this study indicated that the BL approach improved progressive learning outcomes for those students with the least background knowledge who held the highest positive attitudes towards the subject matter. The future researcher could be exploring this correlation in students' learning levels, learning achievements and their attitude.

Furthermore, as the 21st century progresses, more and more students will be able to access and research current and established information as readily as their instructors (Hoic-Bozic, Mornar & Boticki, 2009; Siritongthawon, Donyaprueth & Dimmitt, 2006). As the results presented in students' comments and suggestions, reveal that students and instructors required additional English and ICT skills. Consequently, if instructors do not acquire and improve their technology skills, it is possible that they will be left behind, redundant in the information age.

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