

Learner perceptions on the usefulness of a blended learning EFL program

Kaoru Kobayashi

Tokyo University of Agriculture
Tokyo University of Pharmacy and Life
Sciences
Seikei University
mq7k-kbys@asahi-net.or.jp

Andrea Little

Tokyo University of Pharmacy and Life
Sciences
Waseda University
jejinjapan@yahoo.co.jp

To identify best practices for blended learning in English as a foreign language (EFL) programs, it is essential to understand how learners perceive and evaluate such programs, taking into consideration such variables as learner attitude, proficiency level and computer literacy. This case study evaluates a blended learning EFL program using CALL courseware in light of learners' computer literacy and perceptions of its usefulness. The participants were 141 Japanese first and second year university students. Statistical analysis of the results of the survey conducted revealed that the students' perceptions of the program differed according to the proficiency levels of students. It also showed that the interface of the courseware affects student attitudes toward learning so that the instructor's assistance is indispensable.

Introduction

In recent years traditional face-to-face learning environments and distributed learning environments have begun to converge, creating new learning paradigms, of which blended learning is one (Graham, 2006). CALL pedagogy, too, has moved toward a more integrative approach as many language instructors have started to use CALL courseware as a tool rather than centering courses on CALL alone (Hinkelman, 2005). In line with this, research has found that a combination of face-to-face class time and self-study with an online workbook is an effective and inexpensive way to enhance L2 learning (Zapata & Sagarra, 2007). Indeed, major foreign language textbook publishers are increasingly developing and marketing online workbooks and courseware

to complement their textbooks, making it easier and cheaper for different media, methods, and needs to be integrated within a single context (Godwin-Jones, 2003). As a result, blended learning is becoming an increasingly viable option in many university courses in **EFL** contexts, including Japan.

To identify best practices for blended learning, it is essential to understand how learners perceive and evaluate such programs. As Kessler and Plakans (2001) point out regarding the evaluation of **CALL** materials, "Learners must be included, as they are also experts on their learning as well as the benefactors of well-developed materials" (p. 15). This case study at one Japanese university seeks to identify learner perceptions of the usefulness of a blended learning **EFL** program that uses a publisher's online workbook for self-directed learning in conjunction with traditional face-to-face instruction. The impetus for this study derived from the researchers' observations that student perceptions of the online component of the course appeared to be widely divergent. We were interested in discovering what influenced this divergence.

Background

Definition of Blended Learning in this context

Within current **EFL/ESL** literature, definitions for blended learning abound. However, Leakey and Ranchoux's (2006) definition is particularly apt as it reflects this new convergence of traditionally separate learning environments:

Blended learning in **CALL** is the adaptation in a local context of previous **CALL** and non-**CALL** pedagogies into an integrated program of language teaching and learning drawing on different mixes of media and delivery to produce an optimum mix that addresses the unique needs and demands of that context. (p. 358)

Blended learning, with its multi-modal approach, is thought to create a richer learning experience by integrating some of the benefits of e-learning with the advantages of conventional face-to-face classes (Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2008; Gregorio-Godeo, 2005; Hegelheimer, 2006). By allowing instructors to tap into more than one mode, blended learning offers a "flexible continuum of various learning environments" (Hinkelman, 2005, p. 19).

Studies evaluating Blended Learning for better use

As the trend in **EFL** classrooms in Japanese universities is increasingly toward the integration of technology and face-to-face learning which is called blended, or hybrid, learning, it is necessary to examine how online instruction and traditional face-to-face instruction can be combined for a better learning experience (Hirata & Hirata, 2008) as well as to evaluate this mixed mode from the learners' perspective to see if it is meeting their needs and expectations and is satisfying to them (Murday, Ushida, & Chenoweth, 2008). This view echoes the current literature on evaluating **CALL**. Burston (2003) calls for a qualitative assessment of how instructional technology impacts learner attitudes, motivation, and expectations for language study; Lasagabaster and Sierra argue that one of the most appropriate ways to evaluate **CALL** is by investigating learners' opinions (2003, cited in Bulut & Abuseileek, 2007); and Jones and Issroff (2007) note that in evaluating learning

technologies it is important to understand the role of affective factors and how they are influenced by learning situations.

In a study designed to explore learner perceptions of hybrid learning, Hirata and Hirata (2008), examined the impact of the hybrid learning environment on Japanese collegiate learners as well as the learners' perceptions of the differences between face-to-face learning and independent web-based learning. They found that although the majority of learners preferred the online component to traditional EFL classes, they felt the combination of online learning and face-to-face learning was very beneficial for learners. The study also found the learners highly evaluated the independent, self-paced learning afforded by the online component.

In a study at an American university, Murday et al. (2008) compared learner and instructor satisfaction in hybrid language learning courses with satisfaction in offline conventional courses. They found there was little difference in performance between the two groups of students, suggesting that hybrid courses are successful. However, in terms of learner satisfaction, the qualitative data found strong positive and negative reactions to reduced class time and technology. Students who had problems with motivation and focus fell behind in their courses and this led to frustration. Given the greater opportunities for interaction, students also found hybrid courses more advantageous than totally online courses.

Bulut and Abuseileek (2007) explored the relationship between Saudi EFL learners' attitudes toward CALL and their level of performance in the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. They found the learners generally had a positive attitude toward CALL, but that learner attitude was most favorable for listening skills with writing, speaking and reading skills respectively ranked lower. They did not find a significant correlation between learners' attitudes toward CALL and their achievement in each of the four skills.

In a semester-long study examining proficiency gains, Redfield and Campbell (2005) compared two groups of Japanese EFL learners, one of which used the computer component of a textbook in a stand alone self-access program and the other of which used the textbook plus computer component in a hybrid program. Contrary to their expectations, the researchers found learners in the self-access program made superior gains to those in the hybrid program and hypothesized that this may have been because the self-access group spent more time on task than did the hybrid group, who could easily evade pair and group work when the instructor was monitoring other learners.

Studies on computer access and literacy

An important area of CALL that appears to be under-researched is students' computer literacy and access. In the quest to make blended learning more effective for learning, researchers, such as Winke and Goertler (2008), are calling for greater research into learners' computer access and literacy, arguing that as language programs increasingly implement blended learning instruction this is a necessary step in determining the feasibility of such instruction. Here, following the US Department of Education definition, computer literacy is defined as "computer skills and the ability to use computers and other technology to improve learning, productivity, and performance" (cited in Barrette, 2001, p. 6). Learners' CALL readiness is vital to successful implementation, and research into this variable will provide a clearer understanding of what is necessary for successful blended learning (Barrette, 2001; Hoven, 2006; Kabata, Wiebe, & Chao, 2005). Yet, despite the paucity of studies specifically investigating this aspect of CALL, many researchers see the importance

of training and technical support for learners to ensure appropriate design of blended learning programs and successful implementation, and they are calling for greater attention to this (Coryell & Chlup, 2007; Kabata et al., 2005; Ushida, 2005).

In a recent study, Hong and Samimy (2010) examined the relationship between L2 instructors' use of **CALL** modes in blended learning and Korean **EFL** learners' attitudes toward **CALL** modes. Computer literacy and previous blended learning experience were among the learner characteristics the study considered. They found a positive correlation between learners' computer skills and their attitudes toward **CALL** modes in blended learning. The researchers concluded that learners' computer literacy skills were an important predictor when considering learners' attitudes toward **CALL**.

In a partial replication of Barrette's study (2001) into student preparedness for **CALL**, Winke and Goertler (2008) surveyed 911 students in foreign language programs about their computer access and literacy to determine if they were ready for blended learning language programs. They found that although most learners were computer literate when it came to using computers and the Internet for personal communication, they were less literate when it came to **CALL** tasks, especially when the foreign language used a different script or if advanced computer skills were necessary for the tasks.

Rationale for research and research questions

The studies presented above are a small sample of **CALL** research that has focused on learner perceptions of, satisfaction with, and preparedness for blended learning. These studies found a generally positive attitude toward this type of **CALL**. However, none compared the perceptions of first year university students and second year students. And, reflecting the lack of studies into computer literacy, none looked at computer literacy within the Japanese university context.

The blended learning program studied in the present research has been in use for two years. After using it for one year, and observing student reactions, the researchers wanted to know which aspects of the program were most beneficial and for whom. We were also interested in knowing how students evaluated the program since some students were very enthusiastic about the online component and yet a handful seemed very resistant to it. To better understand student perceptions of the blended learning program, we felt it was important to first investigate the students' preparedness for this program by looking at their computer skills, and then to investigate the students' perceptions of the usefulness of the online program. We were also interested in determining if there was a perceptual divide between first and second year students in terms of their evaluation of the program and their final exam scores. As the final examination in this course is based on the course content in the textbook and in the online component, we felt investigating this aspect would help us understand better who benefits from this program.

The following research questions are addressed:

1. Were the students' computer skills good enough to use the online component successfully?
2. How do the students perceive the usefulness of the online component for learning?
3. Who shows more positive correlation between their evaluation of this program and their final examination scores, first year students or second year students?

The Blended Learning program

The English program in this study is a two-year program for first and second year science majors at a university in Japan. The speaking and listening curriculum combines learners' individual work using a commercial online multimedia learning system with weekly face-to-face classes which use the companion textbook. The teachers use a common syllabus that states which units of the text are to be covered each week, but they can plan classes according to their own teaching style and are free to integrate the online component as they wish. The objectives of the English program are to:

1. Enhance the students' English communication skills, especially listening and speaking skills,
2. Expose the learners to different viewpoints by having them listen to international students' opinions on various topics, and
3. Develop learners' awareness of the target culture.

The course materials

To achieve the objectives, the program uses a commercial textbook series with a companion online video workbook component that is widely available. The textbook series and the online program were designed for either stand alone learning or for blended learning. The online video workbook and the accompanying textbook series is a video-based multimedia program which is designed so that learners can develop integrated skills in listening, speaking, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Much of the content of the online component overlaps with the content in the companion textbook. The topics covered are "universal topics," which enable students to relate to world themes, while providing the necessary context for learning about the English language and global cultures. In both components, each unit is structured around a video episode ("video story") about a group of young adult friends from several countries living, working, and studying in the **US**. In addition, both components have preliminary vocabulary activities along with activities to be completed during and after watching the video. The text includes speaking activities as well as some listening and pronunciation exercises not available online, whereas the online component includes some exercises not in the textbook as well as an extra video segment ("viewpoints"), where authentic interviews with young people from different places of the world are introduced.

Research methodology

Participants

The participants in the present study were 79 first year students and 62 second year students enrolled in the authors' classes in the above blended learning program. All students own Macs as they were required to purchase them upon entering the university. In addition, the university has computer rooms which are open to the students. As for Internet access, 96% of the students responded they had access to the Internet at home, and the others responded that they logged on to the Internet at university.

All students worked on the online component individually outside of class according to the deadlines set by the instructor, and they also attended a weekly listening and speaking **107**

class using the text for face-to-face instruction. During the 70-minute class, the students were asked to complete various activities including cloze dictations, summarizing the text, presenting their views on the theme, and creating and presenting their own dialogues in various forms including as interviews. During class time the instructors covered the exercises in the text as well.

Data collection

Data were collected using a survey (**Appendix**) at the end of the second semester when the first year students had experienced blended learning for one year and the second year students had experienced it for two years. The data used for the present study included the students' final examination scores as well as the survey results. The exam scores used were the actual scores recorded by the **EFL** program.

Survey

The survey had 12 items. Six used a 6-point Likert scale (items 3, 5, 6, 10, 11 and 12), five were multiple choice (items 1, 2, 4, 7, 8 and 9), and two items also allowed students to write in their comments (items 8 and 9). The 6-point Likert scale ranged from strongly disagree or negative (1) to strongly agree or positive (6). The survey was in Japanese, and for convenience we used Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) to administer it online. The survey items are subcategorized as follows:

1. Students' computer literacy and use (items 1 to 3),
2. Student evaluation of the online component for learning (items 4 to 7),
3. Evaluation of the usability of the online component (items 8, 9), and
4. Evaluation of blended learning in terms of course objectives (items 10 to 12).

Data analysis

The collected data were first analyzed using Microsoft Excel for simple percentage calculation. Next, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (**SPSS**, version 17.0) was used for statistical analysis including descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficients and Mann-Whitney tests in accordance with the purpose of each research question.

To answer Research Question 1, the results of items 1 to 3 were analyzed to see the students' level of satisfaction with the online component in light of their computer literacy level. As for Research Question 2, the online component completion level drawn from the results of item 4 and the results of items 5 and 6 were analyzed using Mann-Whitney tests to see whether the completion level affected the students' perceptions of the usefulness of the online component. The results of item 7 were also studied to see how the students utilized the pop up explanations. And, finally, the results of items 8 and 9 were studied to see the students' perceptions of the online component. In order to answer Research Question 3, the results of survey items 10, 11, and 12 were analyzed by descriptive statistics (means and standard deviation) and Pearson correlation coefficients to see whether there were specific types of students who benefited from this blended learning.

Results

Research Question 1: *Were the students' computer skills good enough to use the online component successfully?*

This question attempted to evaluate the learners' preparedness for online learning. Figure 1 shows the students computer literacy based on their responses to items 1 to 3.

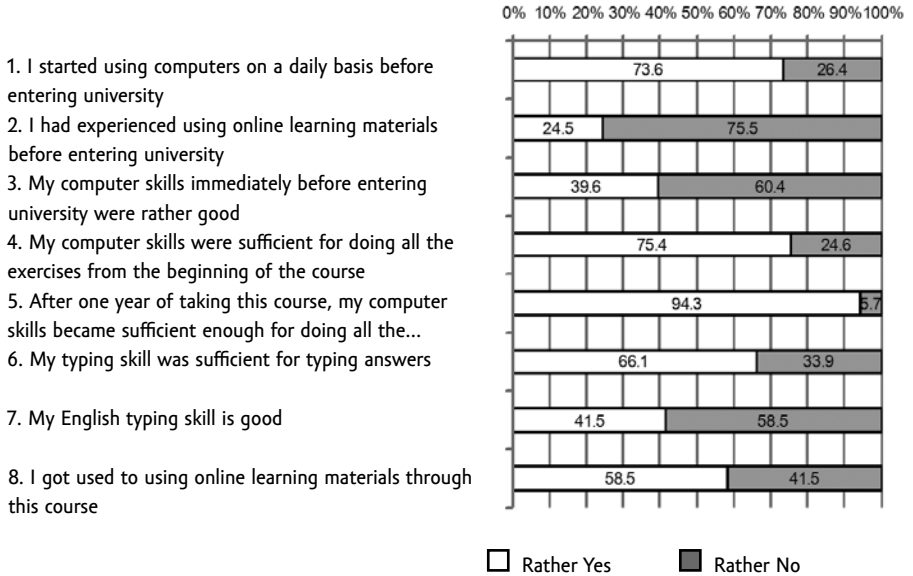


Figure 1. Students' computer literacy

The first statement in the above figure indicates that about three-quarters of the students were familiar with computers before entering university. The breakdown of student responses showed that the students' use of computers before entering university included text input such as writing reports, sending and receiving email, and using the Internet. The second statement shows that 22.6% of the students had used English sites occasionally, while the majority (77.4%) had had little or no experience using them. As for the use of online materials (third statement), only 24.5% of the students had used them. Statements 4 to 6 indicate that although more than 60% of the students were not confident in their computer skills when entering university, about three-quarters of them judged that their computer skills were good enough for the use of the online component and this percentage increased after one year to more than 90%. Contrary to these three statements, statements 7 and 8 indicate that many students are not confident about their typing skills. These numbers indicate that although most of the students had used computers routinely, their background in visiting English sites, using online materials, and their typing skills varied. The students' responses to statement 9 indicate that the use of this online component was a gateway to the use of online learning materials for more than half of the students.

Research Question 2: *How do the students perceive the usefulness of the online component for learning?*

To answer this question, first, we examined the percentage of the online component assignments each student completed (item 4). The results indicated that 96% of the first year students and 93% of the second year students completed more than 50% of the online component assignments. Overall, first year students completed more of the exercises than second year students. Those who did not complete any of the exercises in the online component were automatically excluded from the data analyses for Research Question 2. Students who completed all or part of the exercises were divided into two groups: those who completed more than 90% and those who completed less than 90% but more than 50%. Of those who did the online exercises, there were no students who completed less than 50%.

Next, the students' responses to survey item 5, regarding what they had learned from the online component, and item 6, which exercises they felt were beneficial in the online component, were compared with their completion levels using Mann-Whitney tests. The helpfulness of pop-up explanations given on the online component was also evaluated (item 7).

Significant differences were observed between those students who completed more than 90% of the assignments and those who did more than 50% for "viewpoints," "grammar," "summarizing" and "dictation" exercises. For all of these variables, the mean ranks of students who completed more than 90% of the assignments are higher than those of the other group of students, suggesting that the students who did more than 90% of the assignments evaluated those variables more highly. The results show that while more of the first year students who completed a higher percentage of the assignments felt they learned more about the contents of the online component through the exercises, second year students with higher completion levels perceived that they acquired English language skills. With regard to pop-up explanations, 58% of the first year students felt the online component's explanations about language were helpful while only 29% of the second year students used them.

The analysis of the students' evaluation of the online component (items 8 and 9) demonstrate that most students in both years were satisfied with the contents of the online component but were dissatisfied with its interface. The breakdown of the positive comments showed that students highly evaluated the online component as listening material (61% of the first year and 52% of the second year students). Eighty-six percent of the first year and 70% of the second year students indicated that the online component was useful in reviewing the class because they could work at their own pace, listen an unlimited number of times, and use pause and replay. The analysis of the written comments suggests that most of the students had good enough computer skills to use the online component for listening practice. Regarding what they disliked about the online component, the students' negative perceptions concentrated on the program's operability. Fifty-six percent of the first year and 62% of the second year students were not satisfied with the program's navigating functions. Eighty-three percent of the first year and 78% second year students think that it takes too much time to move to a different screen.

Research Question 3: *Who shows more positive correlation between their evaluation of this program and their final examination scores, first year students or second year students?*

To answer this question, first the students' responses to item 10, what they learned in this
110 blended course, were analyzed in relation to their final exam scores to see the students'

perceptions of what they had learned through blended learning. In this particular course, the final exam questions are made based on the contents of the textbook and the online component. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients obtained from the responses of the first year students, and Table 2 shows that of the second year students.

Table 1: Correlation between first year students' perceptions of blended learning and final exam scores (n=79)

| Variable | M | SD | r |
|--|------|------|--------|
| 1. American culture | 3.65 | 1.14 | .206 |
| 2. International perspective | 3.46 | 1.13 | .041 |
| 3. English in general | 3.87 | 1.06 | .198 |
| 4. English grammar | 2.96 | 1.08 | .203 |
| 5. Vocabulary | 3.79 | 1.21 | .206 |
| 6. Listening skill | 4.43 | 1.30 | .242* |
| 7. Speaking skill | 3.56 | 1.36 | .297** |
| 8. Writing skill | 3.18 | 1.14 | .044 |
| 9. Deeper understanding of video story | 4.37 | 1.17 | .297** |
| 10. Deeper understanding of viewpoints | 4.01 | 1.23 | .227* |

Note. * < .05. ** < .01.

Table 2: Correlation between second year students' perceptions of blended learning and final exam scores (n=62)

| Variable | M | SD | r |
|--|------|------|--------|
| 1. American culture | 3.10 | 1.29 | .339** |
| 2. International perspective | 2.90 | 1.14 | .220 |
| 3. English in general | 3.43 | 0.97 | .159 |
| 4. English grammar | 2.79 | 1.13 | .067 |
| 5. Vocabulary | 3.21 | 1.17 | .289* |
| 6. Listening skill | 3.93 | 1.18 | .104 |
| 7. Speaking skill | 3.18 | 1.30 | .070 |
| 8. Writing skill | 2.64 | 1.10 | .023 |
| 9. Deeper understanding of video story | 3.92 | 1.14 | .312* |
| 10. Deeper understanding of viewpoints | 3.79 | 1.12 | .240 |

Note. * < .05. ** < .01.

Both first and second year students showed only a small correlation between their final exam scores and each variable. However, although the values were relatively small, stronger correlations were found for the first year students than for the second year students. On the other hand, regarding what they felt they had learned, the mean ratings showed that more first and second year students responded that they had enhanced their listening skills and gained a deeper understanding from the video story and viewpoints compared to the other variables such as English grammar. Another difference between the first and second year students was that the second year students felt they learned about American culture 111

and vocabulary. It should also be noted that the mean ratings were generally higher for the first year students.

Second, the students' responses to item 11, the students' perceptions on the use of the online component, were compared with their final exam scores. Table 3 and Table 4 show the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients obtained from the responses of the first and second year students respectively.

Table 3: Correlation between first year students' impressions of use of the online component for Blended Learning and final exam scores ($n=79$)

| Variable | M | SD | r |
|--|------|------|--------|
| 1. Online component should be available in face-to-face class | 3.06 | 1.58 | -.123 |
| 2. The use of text is enough and online component is unnecessary | 2.20 | 1.27 | -.231* |
| 3. I would like to continue using online component | 3.89 | 1.60 | .294* |

Note. * < .05.

Table 4: Correlation between second year students' perceptions of use of the online component for blended learning and final exam scores ($n=62$)

| Variable | M | SD | r |
|--|------|------|------|
| 1. Online component should be available in face-to-face class | 2.97 | 1.64 | .017 |
| 2. The use of text is enough and online component is unnecessary | 2.93 | 1.44 | .038 |
| 3. I would like to continue using online component | 2.77 | 1.27 | .239 |

The results show that, although weak, there were correlations between the first year students' perceptions of the use of the online component and their final exam scores.

Third, the responses to item 12, the students' interest in the use of online programs in general, was compared with their final exam scores. Table 5 and Table 6 show the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients computed from the responses of the first and second year students respectively.

Table 5: Correlation between first year students' impression of use of online programs in general and final exam scores ($n=79$)

| Variable | M | SD | r |
|---|------|------|-------|
| 1. I have always been interested in online learning programs | 2.92 | 1.46 | .174 |
| 2. I could see the advantages of using online learning through online component | 3.32 | 1.33 | .140 |
| 3. I am interested in English online programs | 3.46 | 1.31 | .251* |

Note. * < .05.

Table 6: Correlation between second year students' impression of use of online programs in general and final exam scores ($n=62$)

| Variable | M | SD | r |
|---|------|------|-------|
| 1. I have always been interested in online learning programs | 2.40 | 1.42 | -.028 |
| 2. I could see the advantages of using online learning through online component | 2.50 | 1.16 | .320* |
| 3. I am interested in English online programs | 2.78 | 1.32 | .147 |

Note. * < .05.

Weak correlations observed between the students' final exam scores and their perceptions of online English learning programs in general indicate that students with higher English levels perceive online learning programs as being more useful than students with lower final exam scores. In addition, the mean ratings show that more first year students than second year students have positive expectations of online learning programs. Overall, although the correlations between the students' final exam scores and each survey question were small, some significant correlations and the mean ratings show that more first year students benefited from using the online component.

Discussion

Heeding calls by researchers such as Lasagabaster and Sierra (2003) to evaluate **CALL** programs in light of students' opinions and calls by Winke and Goertler (2008) for more research into students' computer access and literacy, this study has sought to investigate learner perceptions of a two-year blended learning program. The aim was to uncover whether the learners' computer skills were sufficient to successfully undertake the online component; to see how useful they found it; and to determine which students, first or second year, benefited more from the program both in terms of what they felt they learned and their final exam scores.

Regarding Research Question 1, which addressed the adequacy of the students' computer skills for successful use of the online component, the results indicate that the interface of the online component, such as the drag and drop function and character entry, must be improved. The fact that many students had difficulty operating the online component, suggests a drawback in the material, and this has the potential to affect learner attitudes. In a study of online learner satisfaction, Johanson (1996) found learners' satisfaction is positively influenced when technology functions reliably and conveniently (cited in Johnson, Aragon, Shaik, & Palma-Rivas, 2000). Again, second year students had more negative responses about the operability, which may correlate with the fact that they had used the online program longer than first year students. Interface is a weakness with the online program, and over time learner frustration with it will be damaging to the students' motivation. This also indicates the importance of providing guidance and support in the initial stages (Lee & Im, 2006) to ensure that learners understand how to use the functions. Such training may have been beneficial for the first year students as the majority of our students indicated they had little experience with English sites when they entered university. In the long run, however, the interface must be improved to satisfy all students.

Although many students indicated they lacked confidence in their skills when they

entered university, they felt their skills – with the exception of typing in English – were adequate to handle the online component. However, Ushida (2005) points out that familiarity with the use of technology does not always allow the successful transfer of skills to a new context, in this case blended learning. It is possible that this lack of transferability was the source of their lack of confidence. In addition, Winke and Goertler (2008) note that computer literacy in **CALL** must include skills in word processing when using novel scripts, such as the alphabet for Japanese **EFL** learners. Thus, the most we can say is that in our study, the students need better typing skills to benefit more from the online component.

The results of Research Question 2, regarding student perceptions of the usefulness of the online component of the class, show that those who completed more of the assignments viewed it more positively. The results also suggest the online component should be used for different purposes for first year students than for second year students. For the first year students, it is a useful tool to learn content-specific knowledge, while for the second year students it is a helpful tool to acquire English language skills in general. The survey also found that higher level students of both years used the pop-up explanations to enhance their understanding. However, fewer lower level students felt these explanations had value. We hypothesize this may have been because lower level students are less able to process the metalanguage used in the explanations. This indicates that there is a divide both in terms of year and in terms of proficiency level as to which aspect of the online component benefits learners.

Comments indicated that the first year students especially liked being able to listen to the video segments repeatedly and used the online component as a tool to prepare for exams. Again, this indicates that blended learning worked well for them. Why the first year students felt this way while the second year students did not is not known. However, as noted earlier, a greater percentage of exercises overall was completed by the first year students than the second year students, and this may indicate that the novelty of the online component has worn off for the older learners. Lee and Im (2006) found in studying university-level learners in South Korea that although students were generally positive about online learning, over time students become slightly less satisfied with it and spend less time studying. They hypothesize that this may be because as learners gain more experience with online learning, they have higher expectations. Jones and Issroff (2007) appear to echo this when they say there “may be instances where there is a conflict between desired cognitive outcomes and affective outcomes” (p. 201).

Regarding Research Question 3, a stronger correlation was found in the first year students than in the second year students between their final exam scores and their attitudes toward this blended learning program using the online component. As mentioned earlier, the final examination questions in this course greatly reflect what the students have learned in the textbook and the online component in terms of content and vocabulary. This indicates that those who scored higher on the exams benefited more from the course and had a more positive attitude toward it. Looking at what students perceived they learned from the online component, it appears that it is a useful tool for acquiring listening skills regardless of English level as both first and second year students felt they enhanced their listening skills and developed a deeper understanding of the textbook contents through the use of the online component. These findings are similar to the findings of Bulut and Abuseileek (2007) as well as those of Lasagabaster and Sierra (2003), who found that learners felt **CALL** was most useful and enjoyable for listening skills. Interestingly, the current study also found that second year students felt they enhanced their knowledge of vocabulary and

American culture. Zapata and Sagarra (2007) found that online workbooks have positive effects on vocabulary knowledge. They suggested vocabulary knowledge is facilitated by the prolonged use of an online workbook, which may explain the difference in perceptions between the first and second year students for this variable.

Limitations

In seeking to understand who benefits from blended learning, it is necessary to consider all learners, including those who opt out of doing online exercises. One limitation of this study was that it did not investigate the students' reasons for not completing more exercises, and it did not seek to clarify why some students did not complete any exercises. This may have provided important information for making blended learning more beneficial for both years. For example, we may have discovered if these students had difficulty with self-directed learning or procrastination (Ushida, 2005) or simply preferred face-to-face learning. Given that not all students will be satisfied with online learning, it is necessary to understand why it is less attractive to some students than to others.

Another limitation of the study was that it did not carry out any factor analysis. Factor analysis could have shed more light on the usefulness and adequacy of this particular online component as it may have shown more clearly what types of students appreciate specific aspects of online English learning programs, and this could have provided both teachers and developers with useful information.

Conclusion

To sum up, although an online component can be a valuable tool for improving **EFL** skills in general, instructors should be aware that many variables including the proficiency level of students, the length of time they have used the program, the limitations of the program's interface as well as the learner's own level of computer literacy can affect learner perceptions of and satisfaction with blended learning. Murday et al. (2008) point out that the use of technology in the classroom can be a double-edged sword as "the very technology that allow[s] for hybrid courses to be created [can also be] a source of positive and negative reactions" (p. 137). In seeking to implement a program that satisfies learners and addresses their needs, instructors must be aware of all these factors.

It is clear that in **CALL**, interface is an important consideration in evaluating the usefulness of any blended program. For a blended learning program to be beneficial when the interface has problems, it is essential that the instructors be aware of the limitations of the online component and work to circumvent them. With lower level students where negative attitudes are the strongest, it would be beneficial initially for some face-to-face class time to be spent in the computer room where the instructor could help students as they log on and train the students to use the program and its tools.

In addition, given the fact that some students may never have typed in English before entering the blended learning program, it is necessary to do as Winke and Goertler (2008) imply and spend time helping students develop their typing skills. In addition, as computer skills may not be transferable to new environments (Ushida, 2005), it is essential that instructors provide training and support in using the online component in the beginning. As Hong and Samimy (2010) found, students with higher computer skills are more likely to

have positive attitudes toward **CALL**, thus it is important to address the issue of computer literacy and assist those who lack confidence in their skills.

Finally, from this study it is clear that instructors need to be aware that not all students benefit equally or from the same aspects of a blended learning program. In this particular program, it appears the first year students were more satisfied with the online component than the second year students. And, within each year, more proficient students were more able to take advantage of features such as pop-up explanations than less proficient students. These differences need to be considered when evaluating the usefulness of blended learning.

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Author biodata

Kaoru Kobayashi teaches at Tokyo University of Agriculture, Tokyo University of Pharmacy and Life Sciences, and Seikei University. Her research interests include CALL, ESP, vocabulary acquisition and Genre Analysis.

Andrea Little currently teaches at Tokyo University of Pharmacy and Life Sciences and Waseda University. Her research interests include CALL, vocabulary acquisition, and TBLT.