Blended Learning at Meisei University:

A Case Study

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Abstract

In the last two decades, technology has become a part of every aspect of our lives, including education. Within the language teaching industry, there has been a noticeable rise in the inclusion of online learning or blended learning. Blended learning is a relatively loose term, but can be broadly defined as traditional face-to-face teaching combined, or 'blended', with online learning. One common example of blended learning is entitled flipped classroom, which is the reordering of learning activities from the classroom to home or vice versa via online learning tools.

The purpose of this research was to determine the attitudes of 16 pre-intermediate English language learners at Meisei University towards flipped classroom blended learning. The results were defining and an overall majority of students found that this teaching pedagogy enhanced their learning and wanted to continue to use a hybrid of traditional lessons and online learning.

1.1 Introduction

'Blended learning' is one of the most widely discussed topics in recent years in the discourse of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching methodology. Many experts, such as DeZure (2000) and Buckly (2002), have commented on the shift in teaching pedagogies from teacher centered learning to student-centered learning and the use of new technologies to aid this shift. With the availability of high-speed internet access the potential for web-based learning has increased dramatically. This has given rise to the paradigm of blended learning, which is the combination of traditional face-to-face classroom learning and online student self-study directed by the teacher. According to Dziuban et al (2004), blended learning should be viewed as;

A pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment (p. 3).

Finn and Bucceri (2004) define blended learning in a similar way as combining the positive aspects of e-learning with the advantageous aspects of traditional class based learning (2002). The ways in which teachers can include online resources in their curriculum are vast, and include uploading online articles and journals, embedding videos, using blogs, and podcasts all of which can be uploaded to several learning platforms available online, such as Blackboard and Moodle (Jingwei, 2013). Access to these platforms is provided to the students who can complete the tasks set by the teacher in their own time, in addition to the student's traditional classroom lessons. There are a number of ways that educators can use web-based learning in a blended pedagogy. For example, students can be provided with extended readings or online lectures after a lesson has taken place. Another commonly used model of blended learning is entitled 'flipped classroom', which will be the focus of this research.

1.2 What Is Flipped Classroom Blended Learning?

Simply, flipped classroom means that activities that have traditionally taken place outside of the classroom, now take place inside the classroom and vice versa (Lage et al, 2000). Furthermore, according to Verleger and Bishop (2002) flipped classroom is defined as;

a new pedagogical method, which employs video lectures and practice problems as homework, and active, group-based problem solving activities in the classroom […]We define the flipped classroom as an educational technique that consists of two parts: interactive group learning activities inside the classroom, and direct computer-based individual instruction outside the

classroom (p.1).

In typically flipped classroom pedagogy, the teacher may assign a task for homework that is usually conducted in the classroom, such as a video lecture or extended reading online. Traditionally, before the increase in technological tools in learning, students had to attend physical classes to hear lectures. However, nowadays, students can access recorded video lectures easily from their computers or mobile devices outside the classroom, while engaging in more social active group based activities during class time. In this research, the grammar presentation stage of the lesson which conventionally took place in a face-to-face classroom environment was flipped. There are many video lectures of grammar points available to students for free online. Thus, students were able to watch these videos before class and make themselves aware of the grammar, and then engage in more active language production based tasks in the classroom.

1.3 The Advantages of Flipped Classroom

One of the benefits of flipped classroom blended learning in an EFL environment is that it allows students to work on a particular piece language or language skill in their own time and at their own pace, as language acquisition occurs at different speeds for different students. In a traditional classroom environment, the students are subject to the pacing that the teacher dictates. By providing the opportunity for students to work at a pace set by themselves outside the classroom, it should give them more confidence in the classroom (Poon, 2013). Finally, perhaps the greatest advantage of flipped classroom in this context is that it decreases the time spent on the grammar presentation stage of the lesson. As students already had an understanding of the grammar point before coming to class due to watching the online grammar lecture, they can spend more time practicing and producing language in the social classroom environment.

1.4 Aim and Context of this Research

The aim of this research is to determine the attitudes of English language learners towards flipped classroom blended learning in their English communication classes at Meisei University, Japan. At present, flipped classroom is not part of the students' curriculum, and it is hoped that the results of this research can provide an insight into whether or not it should be integrated into the current curriculum.

The participants of this research are 16 second year International Studies Department at pre-intermediate level of English. The majority of the participants are Japanese speakers (12), with 3 Chinese speakers and 1 Bengali speaker.

1.5 Methodology

The research will take place in two parts. Firstly, the research will follow Dziuban et al and Finn and Bucceri's (2004) definition of blended learning; a combination of classroom and online learning. Before the teacher conducts a class on a grammar point, students will be given a video lesson to watch on the grammar topic in question and a worksheet to complete online learning. In class, the teacher will perform a test-teach-test lesson (traditional classroom) whereby, firstly, students will be tested on the grammar using their completed worksheet as an aide to check students understanding of the grammar from the online lecture. During this stage, the teacher can identify any issues students are still having and present those problems in the teach stage. In theory, the teach stage will take less time compared to if the students had not completed the online stage. This allows more time for the final stage of the lesson, test, when students spend time producing the language in extended speaking and writing activities.

Secondly, at the end of the semester students will be given a questionnaire to evaluate their attitudes to flipped classroom learning.

2.1 Data Analysis and Discussion

The next stage of this paper will discuss the results of the survey conducted to evaluate the students' attitudes towards blended learning. It will also provide a short insight into observations of the teacher throughout the process.

2.1.1 Has blended learning helped your language learning?

The first question students were asked was how much they agreed with the statement: *Blended learning (online videos) has helped with my language learning*. The results of this are shown in fig. 1 below.
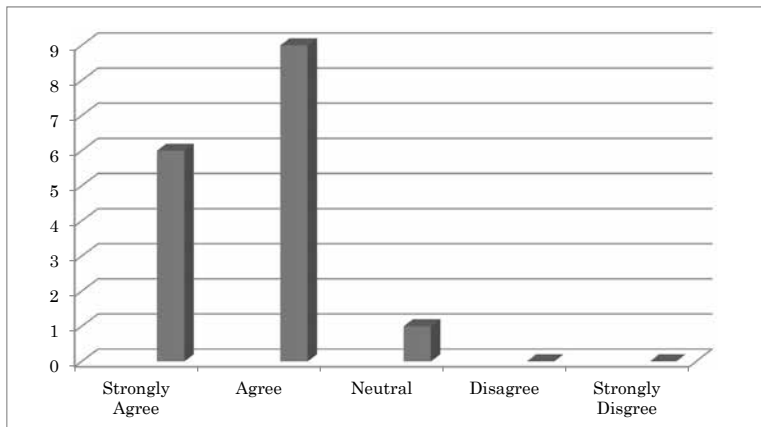

Fig 1. *Blended learning (online videos) has helped with my language learning*

As we can be seen in the chart above, the majority of students either agreed or strongly agreed that blended learning has enhanced their language learning, with only one student remaining neutral. With such a positive response from the majority of the participants towards the use of a hybrid of traditional and technological teaching methodologies, the research then wanted to examine the reasons why students enjoyed blended learning.

2.1.2 How has the use of blended learning helped the students?

In this section on the survey, the goal was to determine the reasons why students believed online learning to be advantageous, if at all. Students were allowed to choose more than one option in this question and were also given additional space to include any other reasons they felt were important.
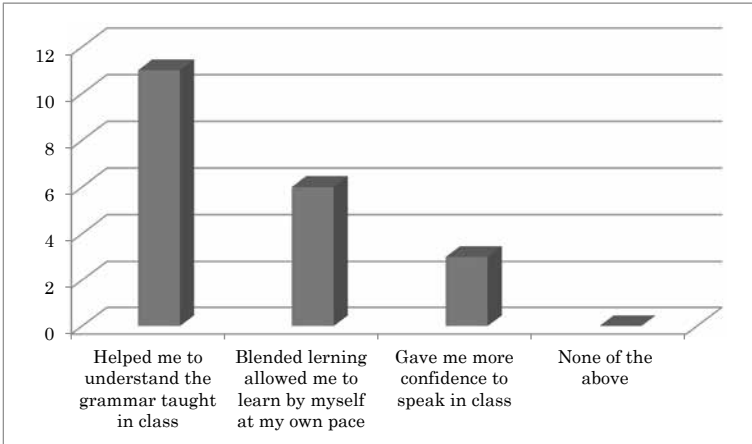

Fig 2. *Reasons for students' opinion on blended learning.*

The chart above outlines that the majority of students who took part in this research believed that the flipped classroom style of teaching grammar helped them to understand grammar in class. Furthermore, 6 students felt it allowed them to learn at a pace set by themselves, with an additional 3 students saying that it gave them the confidence to speak in class. One student commented that it "helped me understand the grammar before class, so I can feel easy to take the class". These results were expected before the research began, and they reinforce the benefits of flipped classroom that were outlined in **section 1.3.** In addition to these reasons, another participant stated that "I think that I want to understand grammar before class. I [can] concentrate on speaking during class". This strengthens the argument that blended learning cuts down the time teachers spend presenting grammar as there is a huge bank of online resources that students can use individually to self-study while increasing the time spent producing language in a social classroom environment,

which cannot be so easily achieved working alone.

2.1.3 Would students like to use blended learning in future?

The final section of the questionnaire focused on whether or not students would like to use blended learning in future, both in their language classes and other subjects at Meisei University. Firstly, their desire to use online learning in their language classes was examined.
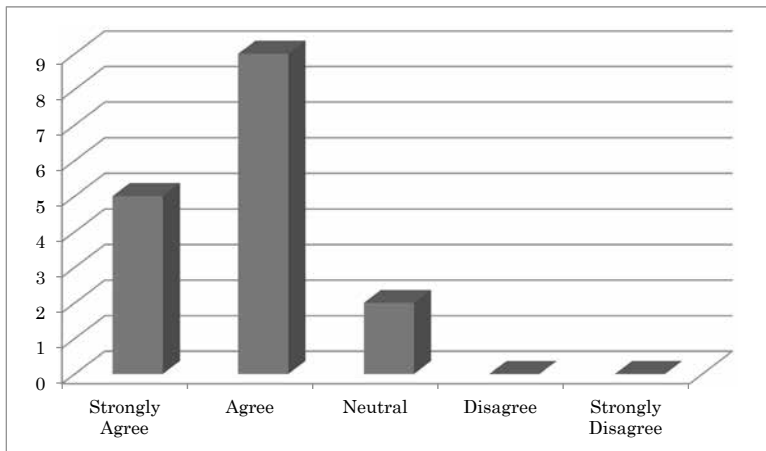
Fig 3 *I would like to use blended learning in my English class again*

These results show that 14 of the participants would like to use blended learning in their English class in future. 2 of the students remained neutral, with one stating that it was "too difficult" for them. A similar pattern can be seen when students were questioned on whether they would like to use blended learning in their other subjects.
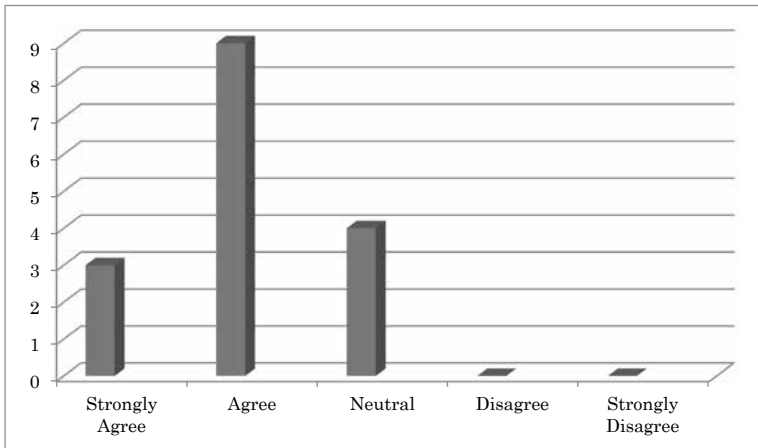
Fig 4 *I would like to use blended learning in my other Meisei subjects*

2.1.4 Teacher Perspectives

This section of the paper would like to provide the teachers perspective on the experiment. Overall, it was a success and the results were not surprising. One limitation of collecting data via questionnaire is the teacher-student power relationship may influence the students' responses, i.e. the students will respond with the answers they think the teacher wants to hear. However, the observation on a class to class basis by the teacher was that students were engaged in the lessons and enjoyed taking autonomy over their learning. Several comments were made during the course of the semester that they enjoyed watching the videos before class, as it was good preparation for them. In saying this, there were problems along the way. The biggest problem arose when 1 or 2 of the students did not watch the video lesson prior to coming to class. This was overcome by working with stronger students to teach the grammar point to the students who had not watched the video. If this type of pedagogy were to be used at Meisei, a learning management system (LMS) would need to be used so the teacher could monitor if students have not completed the assigned task. A follow on issue from this would be that teachers would need training on how to use an LMS. These small difficulties do not outweigh the observed benefits, and so the author feels that further study is necessary.

3.1 Further Study

This paper is the first step on a wider scale research that could change the teaching landscape at Meisei University. As this is the first research of its type at Meisei, it only focused on a small group of students. Thus, the implications of this study are limited for the moment.

However, it certainly opens doors in the area of blended learning at Meisei University and has shown there is a need for more research. Overall, the students' attitudes to blended learning were mostly positive. As a result, a much wider scale experiment needs to be conducted with a greater number of students, and across all faculties. The implications of such a study may lead to a complete overhaul of how subjects are taught at Meisei.

4.1 Conclusion

The main impetus of this study was to determine the attitudes of 16 English language learners towards blended learning at Meisei University. As technology becomes a greater part of our everyday lives, there is a strong need for education to follow suit, although not replacing the role of the teacher and acting simply as another teaching tool. Students at learning institutions across the globe have been reaping the benefits of blended learning and so, the aim of this paper was to determine whether or not Meisei students were also interested in using a similar learning technique.

The results of the study are clear and defining. By using a flipped classroom model in the classroom and then analyzing student attitudes towards it with the use of a survey, it can be shown that the majority of students felt that they benefited from their teacher using this model, and also expressed interest in it being used again in both their English classes and other subjects they study.

While the limitations do need to be mentioned in so much as this study was a preliminary experiment involving only a small number of students, and so the immediate implications of the study for the university are limited. However, this paper clearly shows that there is interest in online learning among students, and this study should be considered a first stepping stone towards a greater more in-depth study taking into the account the attitudes of a higher number of participants across all faculties. The results of such a study could change the teaching landscape at Meisei University.

As competition between third level institutes becomes stronger and stronger, there is a need to keep up-to-date with modern teaching methodologies and cutting-edge teaching tools. In a bid to stay competitive, it is up to us educators to adapt to modern teaching techniques and tools to ensure we are maximizing student learning opportunities. Thus, the closing of this article brings to mind the words of the great American philosopher, John Dewey – 'if we teach today's students as we taught yesterdays, we rob them of tomorrow'.

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Appendix A
Student Questionnaire

Please read the following material that explains this research study. Signing this form will indicate that you have been informed about the study and that you want to participate. We want you to understand what you are being asked to do and what risks and benefits – if any – are associated with the study. This should help you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study.

You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Dermot Lonergan, a guest lecturer at Department of International Studies, Meisei University.

Researcher: Dermot Lonergan   dermot.lonergan@meisei-u.ac.jp

Project Description: This research is part of graduation project of the Department International Studies. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the attitudes of Meisei University students towards blended learning.

Confidentiality: We will make every effort to maintain the privacy of your data. Dermot Lonergan will maintain the privacy of the data collected, monitor data entry, and conduct analyses. Only the researchers will see the data. No release of data collected from the project will identify individual participants in the study.

Invitation for Questions: If you have questions about this study, you should contact the Researcher, Dermot Lonergan, before you sign this consent form. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project or any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study, you may report them – confidentially, if you wish – to the Project Supervisor, Dr. Takanori Kawamata.

Study Withdrawal: You have the right to withdraw your consent or stop participating at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions or participate in any procedure for any reason.

Authorization: I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study. I know that I can withdraw at any time. I have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document.

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Questionnaire: Blended Learning at Meisei University

1. Blended learning (online videos) has helped with my language learning. *Please choose ONE*.

- ■ Strongly agree
- ■ Agree
- ■ Neutral
- ■ Disagree
- ■ Strongly disagree

2. Blended learning:

- ■ helped me to understand the grammar taught in class
- ■ allowed me to learn by myself at my own pace
- ■ gave me more confidence to speak in class
- ■ none of the above

Please choose ALL that are relevant.

3. I would like to use blended learning in my English class again. *Please choose ONE*.

- ■ Strongly agree
- ■ Agree
- ■ Neutral
- ■ Disagree
- ■ Strongly disagree

Please give a reason why:

_____
_____
_____

4. I would like to use blended learning in my other Meisei subjects. *Please choose ONE*.

- ■ Strongly agree
- ■ Agree

- ■ Neutral
- ■ Disagree
- ■ Strong disagree

Please give a reason why:

_____
_____
_____

Appendix A
Sample Student Worksheet to be Completed with Online Video Lecture

<div align="center">

Communication English II A
Blended Learning Worksheet I
Dermot Lonergan

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IilS4SEqyA

</div>

Please watch the video and answer the questions below before Wednesday's class.

1. What two grammar tenses does the video speak about?
   A. _____
   B. _____
2. What are the 2 uses of the past simple?
   A. _____
   B. _____

3. What is the difference between the present perfect and the past simple?

_____
_____
_____
_____

4. The structure of the past simple is:

   (ア)**Subject** + **Verb 'ed'** + **object** – *I played football yesterday*.

   What is the structure of the present perfect?
   _____

5. There is a mistake in the sentence below. Rewrite the sentence so it's correct.

   （ア） A. I have lived in Australia last year. _____
_____

6. Why is sentence A in question 5 incorrect?

_____.