

EFL Speaking Courses Through Blended Learning: A Case Study

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Abstract

This work describes a case study of the basic EFL speaking courses for freshmen at the Department of English Education, School of Education, Kansai University of International Studies, and suggests the efficiency of blended learning, a combination of face-to-face and online learning methods. It is an efficient approach to close the gap between the standard required by the government and the current practice at universities in Japan. First, it does not need ICT environment on camps, and second, it helps students enhance their motivation for autonomous learning in and out of class.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth and improvement in information and communications technology (ICT) has led to the diffusion of technology and ICT. It has been widely applied to language education, and consequently, language teaching methods in higher education have changed a great deal in the last few decades. Especially, e-learning has rapidly grown and been widely applied to universities as an efficient learning and teaching tool in recent years. This work describes a case study of the basic EFL speaking courses for freshmen at the Department of English Education, School of Education, Kansai University of International Studies (KUIS) and suggests the efficiency of blended learning, a combination of face-to-face and online learning methods.

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2. Background

2.1 Higher Education in Japan

The Standards for Establishment of Universities established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 1956 in Japan provides that a course for one credit should normally be organized to contain contents that require 45 hours of learning. However, the Central Council for Education indicates that Japanese university students intend not to study outside regular class hours and that their study hours are much shorter compared with those in the US. Figure 1 shows that 64% of Japanese university students study for less than 6 hours per week, and no less than 13% of them have no time to study other than during class hours. Thus, there is a big gap between the standard required by the government and the current practice at universities in Japan.

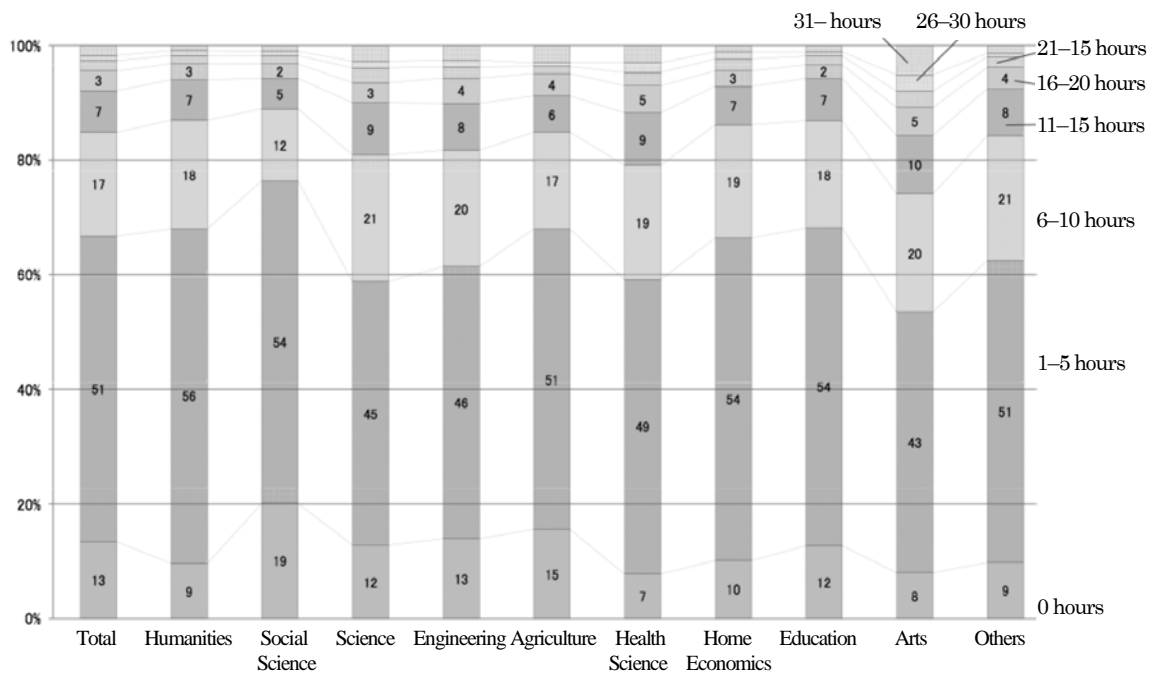


Figure 1. Study Hours per Week (The Central Council For Education 2012)

2.2 E-Learning with ICT

E-learning has been improving this discouraging state by providing students with learning opportunities in ICT environment. Inoue et al. (2014) described several advantages of the ICT environment at universities and e-learning with it. For example, web-based English courses are available at any time other than during class hours and at any place other than inside classrooms, thereby enabling students to study at their own pace. In addition, as students can access various contents, such as class resources, handouts, quizzes, tests, and audio materials on the web, e-learning encourages students to learn for a longer time compared with a low-tech classroom environment. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and a variety of Language Management Systems (LMS), such as Moodle, Navigware, WebClass, Blackboard, WebCT, and Collaboration and Learning Environment (CLE), have been used in recent years. With this background, the importance of class management based on e-learning and ICT is increasingly prioritized, and many universities have been required to introduce ICT.

E-learning with ICT has several disadvantages as well, as Table 1 shows. For instance, students cannot obtain the expected effects unless their computer skills are high enough to put the ICT tools into practical use or make appropriate learning plans using the tools by themselves. Especially for freshmen, it might be difficult to use computers and e-learning contents autonomously in/out of classrooms. Some students, such as those newly entering a university, have difficulty in using their own personal computers by themselves and need teachers' help, as it might be their first time to use computers not for entertainment but for studying.

Table 1. Advantages/Disadvantages of E-Learning (Inoue et al. 2014)

	Students	Teachers
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More learning opportunities outside classrooms • Easy accessibility to web contents • Interactive learning with LMS • Repeatable self-testing/quizzes/homework • Increase of study hours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy upload/revise of class resources/handouts/quizzes/tests/audio materials • Instant check on students' homework/tests results • Instant feedback on students' assignments/outcomes
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High computer skills • High learning motivation • Autonomous learning planning • Not to identify variant expressions of students' answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To teach students computer skills if necessary • To find/recognize possible errors of LMS • To revise grading standards of tests/quizzes of LMS if necessary

There are several reasons for these disadvantages. First, there is a big difference between the learning in high school and that at the university. First-year students may not have adapted themselves to the new situation or the learning at the university as it will take time for them to do so. Second, computer skills depend on each student's backgrounds. How much they had been used to computers or learned practical ways of using computers before admission to a university influences their performance in e-learning. Some students are adept at using ICT tools but others are not. Many universities provide a course that aims to improve students' computer skills. KUIS offers a *Computer Literacy Seminar*. However, in such a case, instructors need to wait for one semester until the course ends to determine that students possess the necessary computer skills. Third, not all universities have enough funds to introduce such an ICT tool or environment to their universities. In the case of KUIS, it introduced one of the popular LMSs, WebClass, for all courses in 2008, and it has been available to any student and instructor at KUIS since then. A common scenario is that instructors cannot hold a class in an ICT environment because the university has a limited number of computer rooms or CALL

classrooms available.

Thus, e-learning is a highly efficient self-learning tool and has a lot of advantages for both students and teachers, such as increasing students' learning hours, but at the same time, it has several disadvantages, such as students' motivation for autonomous learning or the limited number of ICT classrooms. Blended learning will cover such situations by providing students with not only e-learning opportunities out of class but also face-to-face learning in class. The next section describes a case study of the basic EFL speaking courses for freshmen at the Department of English Education, KUIS, using blended learning.

3. Case Study

3.1 Blended Learning

Blended learning is a combination of face-to-face and online learning, as shown in Figure 2. It is seen as one of the most important recent advances in education; Bersin (2004) and Graham (2006) provided examples of its application. As a specialized course at the Department of English Education, School of Education, KUIS, I conducted *Speaking IIA* and *Speaking IIB*, the basic EFL speaking courses for freshmen, in 2016. Table 2 provides the detailed course information.

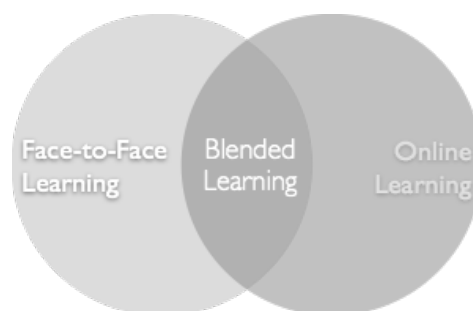


Figure 2. Blended Learning

(What is LMS? Using Blended Learning to Enhance Education)

Table 2. Course Information

Course	Content	Class Hours per Week	Department	Grade	Number of Students
Speaking IIA T45	Speaking	90 min. × 2	Department of English Education	Freshmen	15
Speaking IIB T45	Speaking	90 min. × 2	Department of English Education	Freshmen	18

I used the online contents *English Language Listening Library Online (ELLLO)* for these courses. ELLLO is a free online learning website that is run by an ESL teacher in Japan to help students and teachers obtain free listening lessons online. This online learning tool is ideal for use because it has various types of topics and is appropriate to our teaching objectives. The Department of English Education at KUIS has a mission to cultivate students' English ability, geared for use in the fields of education, tourism and business, to instill in students specialized knowledge related to their field of study, and to cultivate human beings capable of applying a multifaceted perspective to various problems encountered in society through classrooms lessons and actual practice.

3.2 Procedures

To begin with, in face-to-face learning in class, the instructor starts with the ice-breaking of giving the students cards on which simple questions are written in English, such as "Who do you respect?" Each student draws a card from a deck and then gives his/her answer to the question to a partner. The instructor times the interaction and requires the students to continue talking for one minute. Next, the instructor gives a listening content from the ELLLO to the class and requires them to listen to the contents carefully. The instructor then asks the students to give the words, phrases, or expressions they could catch and guess what the day's topic is. In these courses in 2016, I selected one of the contents on the ELLLO website, *The Mixer*, in which six people from around the world shared their thoughts on one question. The aim of the listening

activity is to stimulate the students' interests in the topic and introduce new vocabulary and useful expressions related to the topic. After, students discuss the topic in pairs.

After the pair discussions, the students are given an opportunity to listen to the ELLLO contents with their own PCs in class, as individual e-learning. In this step, students are sufficiently motivated by the talking-in-pairs activity to listen to the contents autonomously and thus can make good progress in their English listening skills. In e-learning conducted while listening, the students understand the content of the talk, listen for specific information, and identify words/phrases/expressions in the audio material on the web by themselves. ELLLO posts new lessons each week, and quiz and vocabulary contents are included in each lesson. In face-to-face learning again conducted after listening, the students are engaged in talking in a group based on their understanding of the day's topic.

At the end of the class, the students write their speaking logs, which include dates, titles, topics/issues, and comments/reflections, as individual work. Table 3 is a sample of the student's speaking log. For the next class, the students are required to review script, vocabulary, and quiz contents on the web as their homework; at the beginning of the next class, the instructor checks the students' understanding through a quiz and reinforces their language skills. The procedures of the class and approximate time needed for each step are provided in Figure 3.

Table 3. Speaking Log

Date	Listening Title	Topic or Issue	Comments/Reflections (not less than 3 sentences)	Semester	Teacher
12-Oct	First Impression #142	impression	I was said my impression is kind, smiling and funny from friends. My impression can't change from now. I don't remember friend's impression.	Fall 2016	Kazuko Inoue
18-Oct	Family Resemblance #40	family resemblance	I think I look like my mother. Especially face. I'm short but my mother is not short.	Fall 2016	Kazuko Inoue
19-Oct	My favorite restaurant is... #127	favorite restaurant	I don't often go to restaurant because I don't have money, but Salserya is cheap, so I am happy. My favorite restaurant is cheap restaurants. I want to go to many restaurant.	Fall 2016	Kazuko Inoue
25-Oct	Best Sports Memory #119	sports	I have played the volleyball and the basketball when I was elementary school. Now, I don't play sports. I want to move.	Fall 2016	Kazuko Inoue
26-Oct	Are you a clean freak? #06	clean	I don't have to clean time. I want to clean once a week. I must to made cleaning time.	Fall 2016	Kazuko Inoue
1-Nov	A Million Dollars #111	money	If I have a million dollars, I want to stop part time job. I want to buy clothes, making-up and accessories. I want to buy lottery.	Fall 2016	Kazuko Inoue
2-Nov	Will people be driving cars in 100 years? #82	cars	I don't drive car because I don't understand about car. I think cars develop like a solar power after in 100 years. I want to see future cars.	Fall 2016	Kazuko Inoue
2-Nov	Yesterday #117	day	Yesterday, I played the flute in club activity. I was very fun. Today, I will play it.	Fall 2016	Kazuko Inoue
8-Nov	Public Transport #124	transport	I like public transport because I don't have car licence. I think easy to use it. It is convenient.	Fall 2016	Kazuko Inoue
15-Nov	What makes a great teacher? #109	good teacher	I think a good teacher is I am easy to understand speaking English. She is Ms.Figoni. I respect her.	Fall 2016	Kazuko Inoue

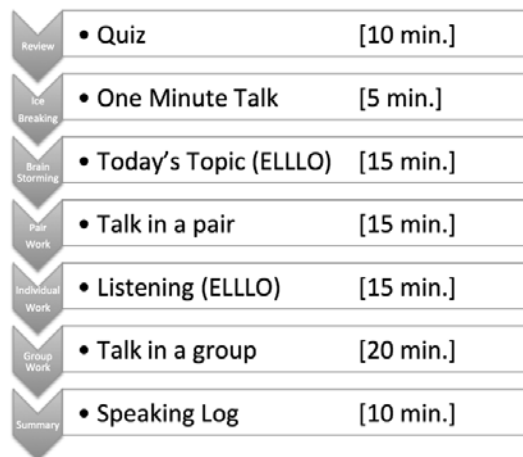


Figure 3. Procedures

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I described a case study of the basic EFL speaking courses for freshmen at the Department of English Education, School of Education, KUIS. As discussed previously, e-learning has not only advantages, such as increasing students' learning hours, but also disadvantages, such as the limited number of ICT classrooms. We may, therefore, reasonably conclude that blended learning, which provides students with a combination of face-to-face and online learning, is an efficient measure for closing the gap between the standard required by the government and the current practice at universities in Japan, as blended learning does not need ICT environment on campus and helps students enhance their motivation for autonomous learning in/out of class.

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What is LMS? Using Blended Learning to Enhance Education.
<<http://www.whatislms.com/using-blended-learning-to-enhance-education/>>.

抄 録

本稿では、高等教育機関において ICT 環境の導入・整備が進んできている昨今の教育環境の変化を背景に、e ラーニングの利点と問題点について整理し、関西国際大学教育学部英語教育学科の 1 年次生対象科目であるスピーキング科目の事例報告を通して、各大学によって異なる教室の環境に制限されない対面学習とオンライン学習のブレンド型学習の有効性について述べる。