

Enhancing Students' Language Skills through Blended Learning

Choosri Banditvilai

English Department, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart University, Thailand

cbanditvtlai@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper presents a case study of using blended learning to enhance students' language skills and learner autonomy in an Asian university environment. Blended learning represents an educational environment for much of the world where computers and the Internet are readily available. It combines self-study with valuable face-to-face interaction with a teacher. This study puts the spotlight on learning outcomes in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class in Thailand in which e-learning strategies are used in parallel with traditional classroom language teaching methods of the four language learning skills. These skills are listening, speaking, reading and writing. The achievements and attitudes of students were compared between the control group and the experimental group to measure the potential of available technology to develop language skills and learner autonomy. The findings from this study show that online practice is directly beneficial to enhance the four language learning skills as well as autonomous learning and learner motivation.

Keywords: blended learning, e-learning, learner autonomy, Communicative Business English, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), motivation

1 What is blended learning?

The concept of blended learning has been around for a long time, but its terminology was not firmly established until around the beginning of the 21st century. Graham (2006) defined "blended learning systems" as learning systems that "combine face-to-face instruction with computer mediated instruction." Poon (2013: 1) adds that the aim of the two delivery methods is to complement each other. Currently, the use of the term blended learning involves combining Internet and digital media with established classroom forms that require the physical co-presence of teacher and students. (Friesen, 2012). The article underscores the concept that many "ingredients" can comprise a blended learning model, including instructor-delivered content, e-learning, webinars, conference calls, live or online sessions with instructors, and other media and events, for example, Facebook, e-mail, chat rooms, blogs, podcasting, Twitter, YouTube, Skype and web boards. In addition, Pankin et al. at MIT (2012: 1) define blended learning as:

Structured opportunities to learn, which use more than one learning or training method, inside or outside the classroom.

This definition includes different learning or instructional methods (lecture, discussion, guided practice, reading, games, case study, simulation), different delivery methods (live classroom or computer mediated) and different scheduling (synchronous or asynchronous) ...

2 Background of the study

The language learning process is highly individual and complex (Launer, 2010). In traditional classroom teaching in Thailand, a teacher or a team of teachers lectures content while students listen, take notes and participate in class activities. In addition, most Thai students are passive and they are willing to accept what the teacher says without questioning (Wiryachitra, 2002). Most classrooms in Thailand are teacher-centered (Noytim, 2006). Moreover, students are different in terms of intellectual ideas and perception. Some students can learn and understand more quickly and easily than others. In conclusion, classroom teaching alone may not be enough to suit individual requirements leading to the need for modern technology to serve each student's needs. To address this, additional lessons were developed on the web for the purpose of this study, here called "E-learning". The lessons in this e-learning program were used to support conventional types of learning. They contained activities and tasks that were not identical but parallel to the classroom lessons— on the same theme, with some of the same vocabulary and some of the same linguistic structures as the students were studying in the classroom. Students were able to access the additional lessons whenever they wanted. The e-learning in this study required students to be self-directed and autonomous. In addition, it should be noted that e-learning is in-line with the current Thai Education Plan. E-learning is described as "anywhere—anytime" learning. An additional benefit is that e-learning provides the students with an opportunity to adapt to the digital era and equip themselves with the skills to be ready for e-university, e-work and life in the 21st century.

3 Literature Review

E-learning is a new technological innovation that is increasingly used in education. Under the National Information and Communication Technology Plan (ICT) and Education Policy, the government is aware of the potential of e-learning and they have provided support with tangible strategies and infrastructures through the Thailand ICT Master Plan and the e-education framework. Within this framework Thai students are provided with opportunities to enhance their studies by accessing knowledge from every part of the world through digital learning (Suktrisul, 2007). Therefore, e-learning has increased in several Thai universities both in Bangkok and in other cities. Kasetsart University, a government institution, encourages its staff to use e-learning pedagogical tools to support students' learning. The University is currently integrating ICT into classroom-based language teaching and integrating the network into the curriculum. E-learning has not only become widely used in Thailand, it has also affected teaching methodology and pedagogy and enhanced learners' educational experience by increasing motivation and allowing learners to interact more freely in academic and work settings. Many researchers have studied the relationship between the use of online learning resources and the enhancement of language skills. This line of research has established a high correlation between using this technology in the language classroom and higher achievement in language proficiency. Dawley (2007) found that e-learning encouraged learners to seek information, evaluate it, share it collaboratively and, ultimately, transform it into their own knowledge. This conclusion is supported by Tanveer (2011) who conducted a research study "Integrating E-learning in Classroom-based Language Teaching: Perceptions, Challenges and Strategies."

In his study he has found that both teachers and learners perceive that e-learning can help students take responsibility for their own learning by making them autonomous and confident. This enables introverted students to interact more freely, provides diversification of activities, fosters an intrinsic impetus of learning and permits the acquisition of valuable study and time management skills. Moreover, e-learning also allows teachers to have a more student-centered form of learning (Poon 2013). In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment, Soliman (2014) carried out a study on using e-learning to develop EFL students' language skills and activate their independent learning. The findings revealed that e-learning is an essential tool that should be used to supplement the EFL face-to-face classroom lessons. It is seen to enhance the students' language proficiency and promote independent learning.

Larsen (2012) studied the use of blended learning, its productiveness and the extent to which these factors affected student perceptions of the ESL writing course. Students were found to work more autonomously and to be more focused while becoming more responsible for their own learning. Not only was autonomous learning enhanced by blended learning, but students actually took ownership of the material. The term "autonomy" and "self-directed learning" are often used interchangeably, however, they still have some distinctions: autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning", whereas, self-directed learning refers to "learning in which the learners themselves take responsibility for their own learning" (Holec, 1981:3-4). Holec first used the term autonomous learner in relation to the development of second language learning, defining it as the learner's ability to take charge of his/her own learning. Poon (2013) stated that enhancing students' motivation to learn on their own "at their own pace and in their own time" is an important aspect of a blended learning environment. Masie (2002: 59) argued that blended learning adds significantly greater opportunity for the learner to master material and move towards transfer and performance.

When properly implemented, blended learning can result in improved student success, satisfaction, and retention. (University of Central Florida, 2015) With this proven success in mind, a blended learning environment was created for this study.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the effectiveness of a blended learning environment which combines one form of e-learning with traditional classroom teaching in order to determine if students' language skills as well as their perceptions of this program are enhanced.

4 Research

4.1 Research Questions

This study attempts to answer two research questions:

1. How can a blended learning program develop students' language skills better than in-class-only teaching?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards blended learning programs?

4.2 Subjects

The subjects in this study were a class of the second year undergraduate English majors at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus in Thailand. They were all Thai. Their ages ranged from 18-21. There were 60 students, 8 males and 52 females. They were a homogeneous group because they were the same age and they had passed three compulsory English courses for English major students. i.e. English Reading, Introduction to English Listening and Speaking Skills and English Structure. They had little experience in using blended learning prior to attending this course. Both groups of students studied the same course, Communicative Business English the first semester of the academic year 2014-2015, which is an elective course. This course focused on improving listening, speaking, reading and writing, to help the students to develop their learning skills and succeed in their chosen careers.

4.3 Research procedure

In this study, sixty students were given a pre-test (TOEIC test) to determine homogeneity in terms of English language ability. The scores of the pre-test were used to place the students into 2 groups of thirty students each (see Table 3). Group 1 students (the control group) studied Communicative Business English in a classroom setting while Group 2 students (the experimental group) had their classroom studies supplemented with e-learning procedures.

Both groups of the students were required to attend 3 hours a week class instruction. However, after classroom instruction group 2 students were required to participate in e-learning program to reinforce their classroom learning. The students accessed the e-learning at their own place and in their own time.

4.4 Research instruments

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the use of e-learning to supplement classroom learning, the following research instruments were used:

4.4.1 E-learning lessons

The e-learning lessons include various learning activities related to the content of each unit. There are six units in this program that consolidate, reinforce and expand on the classroom lessons and students can check their answer automatically. It provides students opportunities to either revisit skill-building activities or increase the skills they have already attained, thus enhancing their language learning. These online lessons were developed by the researcher for students studying Communicative Business English. During the development of the program, the units were tested by the English lecturers at the department to confirm that it covered similar content to the classroom lessons.

4.4.2 Achievement Test

At the end of the semester, the control group and the experimental group were given a post-test. Both groups were tested with the same achievement test (AT) to determine the amount of progress they had made.

4.4.3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire (See Table 4) was used to obtain student's reactions towards using e-learning to supplement an in-class Communicative Business English course. The subjects' responses to the questionnaire were analyzed in terms of mean scores and standard deviations on a five-point Likert scales which were interpreted as follows:

| | | |
|--------------|---|-------------------|
| 4.51 to 5.00 | = | Strongly agree |
| 3.51 to 4.50 | = | Agree |
| 2.51 to 3.50 | = | Undecided |
| 1.51 to 2.50 | = | Disagree |
| 1.00 to 1.50 | = | Strongly Disagree |

Students in the experimental group were required to do a questionnaire. The initial version of the questionnaire was piloted before use. Thirty second-year English major students at the faculty of Liberal Arts and Science were randomly selected to do the pilot questionnaire. The purpose of piloting was to ensure that the language used in the questions was understood by students and the questions successfully elicited the required information. Based on the comments and feedback from the students, the questionnaire was revised

to make sure there was no confusion. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part one collected the students' personal information regarding gender, age and blended learning experience. Part two consisted of ten questions aimed at obtaining student's reactions towards using e-learning to supplement an in-class Communicative Business English course. Questions 1-5 aimed at collecting information on the students' attitudes towards using e-learning to supplement in-class teaching. Questions 6-10 were designed to elicit students' responses on the capacity of the blended learning program to develop students' languages skills.

4.4.4 *Semi-structured interview*

To provide further support, 15 students from the experimental group were randomly selected for interviews of 8 questions at the end of the experiment. Students were asked for their opinions on using e-learning to supplement Communicative Business English course. The interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded with similar themes categorized.

Table 1: Summary of research questions and instruments

| | |
|--|--|
| How can a blended learning program develop students' language skills better than in-class-only teaching? | Achievement Test in the pre-test, post-test and students' attitudes in the questionnaire |
| What are the students' attitudes towards the blended learning program? | Questionnaire and semi-structured interview |

5 Instructional design

In this study Group 1 (the control group) was taught using face to face instruction only. The students received lecturers, tutorials and homework. Group 2 (the experimental group) was taught using the same method of teaching as Group 1. However, it was supplemented by e-learning lessons. There was an orientation phase to introduce the e-learning program and provide an example of e-learning supplementary material to Group 2. According to Soliman (2014), there are many e-learning activities that can be used to enhance students' language proficiency and independent learning. In this study, the researcher developed e-learning lessons which were parallel with the classroom lessons. The main objective of the e-learning program was to develop the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students practiced listening for gist, speaking, reading and writing tasks. There were a variety of activities such as, multiples choices, matching and short answer questions. The students completed the activities independently and they were tested on their understanding of the content. Students could progress to the text page, be taken back to a previous paper or be redirected down a different path.

6 Instructional Procedure

According to the class schedule, the morning class (Group 1) underwent the experiment without e-learning and the afternoon class (Group 2) underwent the experiment using e-learning to supplement in class teaching. An example of the procedure was as follows:

Table 2: Stages for teaching Group 1 and Group 2

| Stages | Group 1 | Group 2 |
|---|---------|---------|
| Teacher lectured. | ✓ | ✓ |
| Students did activities. | ✓ | ✓ |
| Teacher assigned homework. | ✓ | ✓ |
| Teacher introduced the e-learning program. | ✗ | ✓ |
| Students studied with the e-learning program. | ✗ | ✓ |
| Students completed a questionnaire. | ✗ | ✓ |
| Teacher interviewed the students. | ✗ | ✓ |

7 Findings from the application of the three research instruments

7.1 Data from the test (AT)

At the end of the course, both students in Group 1, the control group who had received no supplementary e-learning, and Group 2, the experimental group who had received supplementary e-learning, were given a post-test with a 50-minute time limit. The scores were collected from each group, and then the mean and standard deviation of the control group and the experimental group were calculated. To ensure that the control group and the experimental group were similar in terms of language abilities, we conducted independent t-test. The results are shown in table 3.

Table 3: Independent t-test between control group and experimental group

| Test | N | Mean | S.D. | T-Value | P-Value |
|--------------------|----|-------|------|---------|---------|
| Pre-test | | | | | |
| Control group | 30 | 27.53 | 5.65 | 0.37 | 0.715 |
| Experimental group | 30 | 27.01 | 5.33 | | |
| Post-test | | | | | |
| Control group | 30 | 37.28 | 4.81 | -3.38 | 0.001 |
| Experimental group | 30 | 41.43 | 4.7 | | |

Table 3 shows that the mean score of the pre-test of the control group and experimental group were nearly the same (27.53 and 27.01, respectively) and the results of t-test indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups with respect to their language abilities ($t = 0.37, p > 0.05$). From the post-test results, the experimental group had a higher mean score than the control group (37.28 and 41.43, respectively) and the results of t-test indicated that there was significant difference between the two groups ($t = -3.38, p < 0.05$). The significant increase in mean score in the experimental group highlighted the potential for accelerated development of students' language skills through e-learning.

7.2 Data from the questionnaire

After finding a significant increase in learning for the experimental group, students received a questionnaire to determine the reasons for their enhanced learning. In the questionnaire, the subjects were asked about their perception of e-learning's effect on their language skills.

Table4: Questionnaire

| | Questions | Mean | SD |
|----|---|------|------|
| 1 | The e-learning lessons help the students understand the subject better. | 4.50 | 0.51 |
| 2 | The lessons in the e-learning program are interesting. | 4.40 | 0.56 |
| 3 | The teacher should use this program to supplement in-class teaching. | 4.57 | 0.50 |
| 4 | This e-learning program motivates the students to study by themselves. | 4.65 | 0.55 |
| 5 | The students' learning experience is enhanced by this e-learning program. | 4.43 | 0.50 |
| 6 | This e-learning program develops students' language skills. | 4.53 | 0.51 |
| 7 | This e-learning program develops students listening skills. | 4.40 | 0.47 |
| 8 | This e-learning program develops students speaking skills. | 3.80 | 0.41 |
| 9 | This e-learning program develops students reading skills. | 4.30 | 0.44 |
| 10 | This e-learning program develops students writing skills. | 4.23 | 0.53 |

As can be seen from Table 4, the students in the experimental group had favourable attitudes towards enhancing their language skills through e-learning. Most students thought that this program should be a supplement to in-class teaching. In addition, there was a favorable response relating to motivational aspects delivered through the use of technology. It motivated the students to study by themselves. It also helped them better understand the lesson because the supplementary lessons covered similar content. Moreover, students felt that this program could both facilitate and enhance their learning experience. It helped them develop their 4 language skills– listening, speaking, reading and writing. Here a caveat should be noted: the mean value of

question number 8 is lower than other items because the students felt this program did not afford them enough speaking practice.

7.3 The data from the semi-structured interviews

The results of the semi-structured interviews show that most of the students in the experimental group had positive attitudes towards using supplementary e-learning. They considered this program more interesting than normal classroom learning because they could study by themselves without losing interest.

The following are summaries of the students' stated reasons for both positive and negative aspects of using e-learning to supplement in-class teaching. Extracts showing a positive response include:

7.3.1 Accessed whenever convenient

"I like the e-learning program because it is simply accessible anytime and anywhere."

"I like this teaching program because I can access my lessons at any time. This makes me feel relaxed and enjoy learning."

"I want the teacher to supplement e-learning in-class teaching because I can access when I want it."

"I can review materials when I want and feel very comfortable doing the task at home."

"I like this program because I can work whenever and wherever I prefer."

7.3.2 E-learning improves their language skills

"This program helps me think and develop my language skills."

"I like e-learning because it can help me improve myself in learning English."

"E-learning helps me develop my listening skills. If at first, I cannot understand what they say. So I listen again and again until I can understand."

"My reading skills have improved and I can read faster."

"I think it is good to use this program because I have more opportunity to practice listening, speaking, reading and writing."

7.3.3 Motivates students to learn more

"E-learning can motivate me to learn more because I actively involved in learning."

"The exercises are motivating and I like doing it a lot."

"I enjoy learning a lot and I also have a better attitude towards learning English."

7.3.4 Self-directed learning

"With e-learning, I take the responsibility for my own learning."

"Traditional classrooms are teacher-centered but in e-learning we do everything by ourselves."

"I plan my time to study by myself."

"E-learning offer flexibility to learn on my own pace."

"With e-learning I am exposed to the language outside the classroom and work independently on improving my language skills."

7.3.5 Immediate feedback

"I prefer e-learning activities as I get immediate feedback."

"The task that I like most is listening to complete the conversation. It is challenging and I find that simultaneously checking the answers by myself is very interesting."

7.3.6 *Interesting and easy presentation*

"The presentation is interesting and stimulating and there are a lot of visuals and sounds which make it similar to a real communication in the classroom. Moreover, material is easy to follow."

7.3.7 *Reinforce classroom learning*

"I really like this program because the lessons are very similar to the lessons in my class. I can use the knowledge I already had to link with the new knowledge. It improves my language skills."

"Though the content of in-class teaching and e-learning are similar, the e-learning seems to expand what we learnt in class."

However, five interviewees highlighted negative aspects of the e-learning program:

7.3.8 *Lack of an actual teacher's face-to-face feedback*

"I prefer to get the feedback from the teacher in class rather than virtual feedback because I can discuss with the teacher directly."

"If I have a difficult time to understand how the passage goes, no one is there to explain it to me like we have in a classroom."

"I prefer face-to-face feedback because it is more effective and personal."

"I like to study in a classroom because I can talk to the teacher. When I don't understand the lesson, I always ask her."

"I prefer face to face interaction with the teacher."

7.3.9 *Slow computer or network*

"Sometimes the Internet connections are so slow and unavailable that I am wasting my time while I wait to be connected".

"I can't find the server, so I can't use e-learning".

Data from the semi-structure interview showed that e-learning reinforced students learning with parallel lessons, thus sparing the students the embarrassment of asking the teacher to repeat something over and over again. In addition, it gave the students more freedom to control what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it. Moreover, it provides flexibility for students to work at their own pace and time, not at the teacher's pace, with prompt feedback online (Poon, 2013). In this way, students could concentrate more on the material they found challenging and increase their pace on the tasks/activities that were quickly acquired. Furthermore, students were exposed to the language outside the classroom and worked independently on practicing their language skills and improving their learning. However, some students stated that having the teacher available was more conducive to learning, especially to answer questions promptly and explain them in details.

The downside is that of time constraints caused by the computers/network being down or very busy. These technical difficulties may be dealt with through upgrading and maintaining of technical equipment — server, intranet and the Internet. In the event that additional spending on system upgrades is unrealistic or impossible, a self-defined blended learning environment can be established within the situational constraints.

8 Discussion and practical applications

E-learning received both positive and negative feedback from the students. The goal of the study was to find out if the addition of e-learning in a blended learning environment would enhance learning. It might be noted that some student's preference was face to face interaction. However, the findings of e-learning program demonstrated that an increase in students' motivation and the development of more autonomous learning.

8.1 Enhanced Learning

The data obtained from all three sources indicates that the supplementary e-learning program developed students' language skills better than in-class-only teaching. The online program reinforces and expands the textbook and classroom activities, thus providing students opportunities to revisit activities and tasks that are

skill-building. It also enhances the skills they have already achieved. E-learning also encourages students to study independently and spent more time engaging in the English language to improve their language proficiency.

8.2 Changes in Roles

From a response to an interview question: “Traditional classrooms are teacher-centered but in e-learning we do everything by ourselves.” It can be inferred that the transfer from teacher-centered to student self-directed learning suggests considerable changes in the delivery of language skills learning. Poon (2013) supports this idea that blended learning is a fundamental redesign of the instructional model with a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered. A transformation of the role of the teacher from lecturer to facilitator enables the students to actively engaged in their learning and take more responsibility for their own learning while receiving support and encouragement from a facilitator (Moore, Akhurst & Powell, 2010). In addition, students also appreciated the change in role of the teacher to scaffolding builder/facilitator (Noytim 2006). Students regarded this e-learning program as a helpful tool for them to learn English. E-learning also encourages learners to work independently as each student can work on different tasks at their own pace within the “integrated learning environment” (Soliman, 2014). In other words, advanced learners would be able to work faster and finish more activities than novice learners. (Nedeva & Dimova, 2010). In addition, it should be pointed out that students at all levels of English ability were further challenged by the e-learning tasks because the lessons were not identical to the classroom lessons but parallel to them. Hence the lessons were not redundant, as they related to the textbook and classroom materials.

8.3 Motivates Students’ Learning and Learner Autonomy

The data from the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview (See results under “Self-directed learning”) demonstrates that students have a positive attitude towards the use of e-learning because it enables them to become more motivated and more involved in the learning process. This can often encourage learners to become more responsible and willing to engage in their own learning, which is defined as learner autonomy (Benson, 2004; Dornyei, 2001; Ely, 1986; Gardner, 1985; Kyriacou & Zhu, 2008). Wan-er (2008) found that students’ positive attitude and learning motivation, leads to greater autonomy. Ellis (1994) recognized learner motivation as a key factor influencing the rate and success of second/foreign language learning. In this research we found that motivation not only leads to enhanced learning, but self-directed e-learning motivated students to greater autonomy in the learning process.

8.4 Face-to-face interaction

While there are many positive aspects to blended learning, the lack of actual face-to-face feedback from a teacher may be difficult for some students to cope with. Some students interviewed believed that we can use e-learning to aid students’ learning, but it should not be used to replace the valuable interaction between teachers and students. Human interaction provides a feeling of social connectedness not possible in virtual communication. A possible solution to this discomfort with a lack of face-to-face interaction (Key, 1980) is to create a blended learning environment that actually provided more teacher/facilitator interaction, in a word, redefining the blended learning mix towards a larger classroom component.

9 Conclusion

Blended learning is a valuable concept that can be used to more successfully achieve teaching goals. It allows students to develop and practice English language skills outside the classroom at anytime and anyplace they choose, as long as they have access to an Internet connection. In addition, it permits them to repeat lessons without judgment or pressure. The proven enhancement of student learning documented in this study validates this type of blended-learning. The addition of e-learning to classroom teaching provides students with opportunities for autonomous learning and a decentralized transfer of knowledge.

10 Limitations and future studies

Although this study was carefully developed, one limitation of this study is that it was limited only to one class of Kasetsart University (Thailand) students. Further studies might be conducted with different academic/non-academic institutions, disciplines, age groups and blended learning combinations. These studies would need

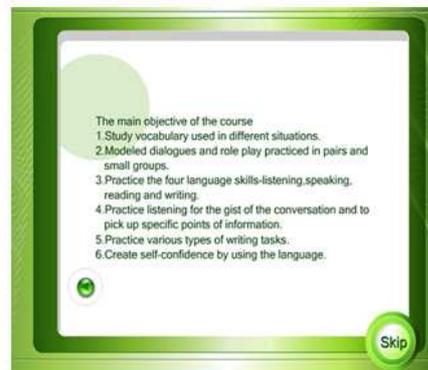
to be structured according to institutional, budget considerations and materials/media, as well as students' learning styles.

Appendixes 1-4: Samples of screen images from e-learning program

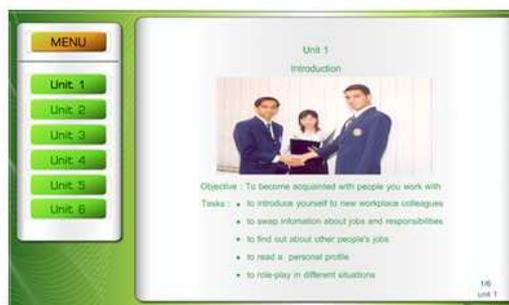
Appendix 1: Course Description



Appendix 2: Course Objectives



Appendix 3: Contents



Appendix 4: Listening Exercises



Appendix 5: Questions of semi-structured interview

1. Do you think blended-learning enhances your listening, speaking, reading and writing? If yes, how?
2. What are the differences between classroom learning and blended learning?
3. How do the teacher's and students' roles in this program differ from those in your normal classes?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this blended learning program?
5. How would you describe the relationship between the e-learning and in-class learning?
6. Would you like other teachers to use blended learning in English classes? If so, how?
7. Do you prefer a normal classroom or a classroom supplemented by e-learning?
8. Are there any other comments you want to make about the program or about what you have learned in the program?

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