

**INTERMEDIATE GREEK EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDES
TO ON-LINE TEACHING PRACTICES:
A BLENDED TASK-BASED ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING
APPROACH**

by **Trisevgeni Liontou**

Greek Ministry of Education,

Andrea Papandreou 37, Marousi 15180 Greece

tliontou @ enl.uoa.gr

Abstract

This paper reports on a one-year longitudinal study that adopted a blended teaching approach based on designing and implementing an online EFL course to be used by Greek students aged 13-14 years old along their more traditional face-to-face lessons. The reason for creating a more dynamic learning environment aligned with the rest of the curriculum was to increase EFL learners' engagement and motivation through their exposure to authentic online material and participation in a variety of reading, writing, speaking and listening tasks. Data analysis of pre- and post-achievement tests on English language reading comprehension performance along with students' Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) attitude questionnaire showed that participants generally had a positive attitude toward CALL. At the same time, open online access technologies gave them the opportunity to further develop their EFL reading comprehension skills. The paper concludes by highlighting the fact that online class components were not designed to fit the online tools into a task-based EFL lesson, but rather served the learning objectives of the actual lesson based on a blended teaching approach.

Keywords: on-line teaching practices, Computer-Assisted Language Learning, English Language Learning, students' attitudes

1. Introduction

According to McIntyre *et al.* (2014: 2), "the Internet has significantly changed how we communicate with one another as well as how we access, share and facilitate information". Providing materials for students to complete courses online has created a new era for teaching, since not only can students benefit from collaborative learning but institutions and instructors can efficiently distribute materials and information (McIntyre *et al.*, 2014; Levinsen, 2006; Parker *et al.*, 2013). Although many of us are already familiar with Internet-based communication technologies and have comfortably integrated it into our daily life, understanding the place of online learning in digitally-facilitated social interaction, professional practice and distant education is becoming increasingly important (Atkins, 1991;

Felix, 2003; Golonka *et al.*, 2014; McIntyre *et al.*, 2014). While online education has generally started with the use of technology as a support tool to conventional teaching methods – such as whiteboards, overhead projectors and word processors – it has since developed into a process or pedagogy (Stickler & Hauck, 2006; Walther, 1992; 1995). McIntyre *et al.* (2014:2) acknowledge that:

the issue is no longer one of how to use technology to teach, but one where teachers acknowledge the way the world is already developing, and understand the significance of online literacy and the role that collaboration and online engagement plays in student learning and their future workplace environment.

Such an approach is in line with integrative CALL based on “a perspective which seeks both to integrate various skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and also integrate technology more fully into the language learning process” (Warschauer & Healey, 1998: 58).

Due to its reported positive effect on language learning, the use of technology as a language acquisition medium has increased phenomenally in the last two decades (Greenfield, 2003). As Furstenberg (1997) notes, CALL is a tool that enhances learner-learner interaction, while Warschauer (1997) points out that CALL can help learners use language in authentic situations. In a similar line, Kelm (1998) also argues that CALL can help learners use language in authentic situations while promoting socialization and communication among them.

Nevertheless, there seem to be a certain degree of resistance against the integration of CALL into EFL curricula “since some people may have negative attitude toward CALL because they think that it is a kind of unwanted ‘luxurious’ change” (Bulut & AbuSeileek, 2006: 15). To address concerns on the integration of CALL into ESL/EFL curricula, Gillespie and McKee (1999) suggest it is necessary to judge the success of CALL by investigating, amongst other things, students’ attitude toward its effectiveness. Lasagabaster and Sierra (2003) also express the belief that researchers should take students’ opinions into consideration when CALL programs are evaluated, since students are potential contributors to the development of their language learning tools. Based on the above literature and on the importance of focusing on understanding effective pedagogical strategies for online teaching from EFL learners’ point of view, the aim of the present research is to empirically investigate the impact of online teaching practices on young intermediate EFL learners’ motivation and reading comprehension competence through their participation in an online English language classroom.

This study bears resemblance to prior studies concerned with how CALL affects student achievement while investigating EFL learners' general attitudes toward computers and, more specifically, toward the use of computers when developing their reading comprehension skills. At the same time, the originality of the study lies in the combined purpose of identifying the relationship between EFL learners' attitude toward CALL and their level of achievement in EFL reading comprehension competence when adopting a blended task-based English language learning approach with young learners.

2. The study

2.1. Research aims

The main aim was to create a more dynamic learning environment aligned with the rest of the curriculum in order to increase young EFL learners' engagement and motivation through their exposure to authentic material and participation in real-life tasks. In accordance with the aims of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is the general attitude of intermediate Greek learners of English towards the use of CALL in their language lessons?
2. What is their attitude towards using CALL to enhance their EFL reading comprehension competence?
3. Is there a significant improvement in intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension competence after attending a one-year online EFL reading course?

2.2. Objectives and design

The current study, which lasted one year and consisted of two face-to-face lessons per week plus online activities, was based on designing and implementing an online EFL course directed to a selected sample of 40 intermediate EFL students aged 13-14 years old alongside their more traditional face-to-face lessons. A number of online activities were designed, including the following:

- a) an on-line classroom with hand-outs, extra activities, resources and discussion groups for students to further develop their digital literacy along with their English language competence;
- b) a wiki for students to make a contribution and post their own messages on a specific topic;
- c) a series of *Skype* group discussions with invited external guest speakers;

- d) a private *YouTube* space for students to upload their videos and watch relevant EFL material.

The learning objectives were to:

- a) expose EFL students to new vocabulary related to eating and cooking;
- b) allow them to talk about different kinds of food;
- c) facilitate learning how to give cooking instructions;
- d) talk and write about healthy and unhealthy eating habits.

These topics were part of the EFL curriculum and thus served to blend and complement classroom and online learning objectives.

EFL students' expected learning outcomes included the abilities to:

- a) express and exchange ideas with their classmates regarding eating habits/ cooking/ recipes;
- b) skim and scan relevant information read;
- c) acquire new vocabulary related to giving cooking instructions;
- d) use newly acquired language in socially meaningful tasks;
- e) increase their intercultural awareness by being exposed to eating habits, foods and recipes from various countries.

2.3. Participants

Selected participants came from a junior high school located in Athens, Greece and had all been taught *Information Technology* as a compulsory school subject for five years before taking part in the study. As a part of their IT courses, students had been exposed to various word-processing and desktop publishing software applications and were familiar with online environments including wikis and *YouTube*. Participants were chosen for their high grades achieved in their IT school exams and were, therefore, expected to have a similar level of digital literacy. Their language proficiency (intermediate level-B1) was diagnosed through a calibrated English language test (*Cambridge Preliminary English Test-PET*).

2.4. Tools and procedure

The online class components consisted of a free on-line *Omnium* classroom with on-line hand-outs, extra activities, text resources and discussion groups for students to further develop their digital literacy along with their English language competence. The *OmniumClass* is a free e-learning software package, designed to help teachers to quickly set up their online classes. Following parents' written consent, the intermediate EFL students taking part in the

present study were able to perform different activities as registered users with controlled access. These included revising information presented in the classroom (hand-outs and video lectures), doing extra online activities such as computer-based quizzes with gap-filling, multiple-choice, true-false, drag-and-drop activities, accessing online resources such as e-books and electronic dictionaries, adding comments/suggestions/ideas for projects, topics they would like to talk about in-class, as well as posting their wikis on a variety of eating topics. Their individual contributions to each specific wiki formed part of their classroom evaluation so students were more than willing to post comments and share thoughts and knowledge with their classmates.

In addition, *Skype* was used to set up a series of guided group meetings with invited external guest speakers, including a dietician, a chef, a doctor and a gymnast, who contributed by discussing different eating related topics with students.

Flickr was also used to allow students to upload their own projects and photos to the English Classroom gallery. Finally, students were asked to create their own “healthy eating” videos and post them in a private *YouTube* space shared only with their classmates. Through the use of video analytics in *YouTube*, it was possible to identify patterns of how students accessed and watched relevant material and further worked on their language skills.

On the other hand, data collection tools were used to gather valuable information on intermediate EFL learners’ perceptions of online teaching practices. A five-point Likert scale paper-and-pencil attitude questionnaire was administered to them upon completion of the course. To facilitate respondents’ understanding and ease their answers, the questionnaire was written in respondents’ native language, Greek. This minimized reliability and validity problems caused by the language factor. Participants were requested to rate their agreement or disagreement with 20 statements using a five-point scale. Statements were related to their attitudes to online teaching practices, feelings of preference, enjoyment and motivation when taking part in online activities, as well as perceived difficulties encountered during the course. The CALL attitude questionnaire (see Appendix 1) used in the present study was an adapted version of the one used by Bulut and AbuSeileek (2006).

Furthermore, a standardized multiple-choice reading test was used to investigate the impact, if any, of on-line teaching practices on EFL students’ reading skills. The test consisted of four texts with five multiple-choice reading-comprehension questions per text and was administered to all participants at the beginning of the course. A parallel version of the same test was used to assess reading competence upon completion of the course. A total of 40 reading comprehension questions per student and 1,600 for the whole group of

participants was collected. Once the questionnaires were collected, data was tabulated and synthesized for statistical analyses. Data coding consisted in assigning a code number to each item. Frequency distributions were then calculated. All percentages were reported as valid percentages with missing data excluded. The mean, median and standard deviation estimates were then used to indicate average responses and variability of attitudes. As Wiersma (2008) explained, survey results typically include this kind of descriptive information, since such an approach enables the researcher to provide general information about respondents' central tendency when answering each question, and further show how responses disperse around the center. Finally, data were subjected to further statistical analysis using IBM SPSS 20.0 statistical package. As far as reading comprehension performance is concerned, the mean task scores per text of the 40 EFL learners were estimated. These mean scores, related to the specific multiple-choice reading comprehension questions included in each set of analyzed texts, revealed significant relationships between mean reading performance before and after taking part in the designed online course.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. English language reading comprehension achievement tests

Data analysis of pre- and post-achievement tests of English reading comprehension was based on a total of 800 multiple-choice reading comprehension questions from the pre-test and 800 multiple-choice reading comprehension questions from the post-test. Results indicated that open online access technologies gave intermediate EFL participants the opportunity to enhance their reading skills through their exposure to authentic on-line material that did not form part of their traditional classroom-based English language lessons. More specifically, in order to compare the mean reading performance in the pre-test and post-test, a set of independent sample t-tests were carried out. The results of this analysis showed that EFL participants' mean reading performance was significantly higher in the post-test which was parallel in form and level of difficulty to the pre-test, which could be partly attributed to their exposure to a wider range of on-line text resources and reading activities ($t=8.851$, $df=38$, $p=0.021$).

3.2. Learners' general attitude towards online EFL classes

As can be seen in Table 1, results from learners' general perceptions towards online classes (Questionnaire Statements 1-15) showed that the majority of responses ranged on the average

from fairly to very satisfactory and only a small percentage of participants averagely found the online course slightly interesting to follow (see for example Statement 5: *An online course is an interesting way of learning English*).

Table 1: Learners' general attitude towards online EFL classes.

| Statements | Strongly disagree | | Disagree | | Not sure | | Agree | | Strongly agree | | SD |
|------------|-------------------|-----|----------|------|----------|------|-------|------|----------------|------|-----|
| | Freq. | % | Freq. | % | Freq. | % | Freq. | % | Freq. | % | |
| 01 | 1 | 2.5 | 1 | 2.5 | 4 | 10 | 14 | 35 | 20 | 50 | .71 |
| 02 | -- | -- | 2 | 5 | 6 | 15 | 22 | 55 | 10 | 25 | .80 |
| 03 | 1 | 2.5 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 28 | 24 | 60 | 5 | 12.5 | .62 |
| 04 | 2 | 5 | 11 | 27.5 | 3 | 7.5 | 18 | 45 | 6 | 15 | .88 |
| 05 | 1 | 2.5 | 1 | 2.5 | 2 | 5 | 22 | 55 | 14 | 35 | .92 |
| 06 | 1 | 2.5 | 3 | 7.5 | 13 | 32.5 | 20 | 50 | 3 | 7.5 | .88 |
| 07 | -- | -- | 2 | 5 | 8 | 20 | 28 | 70 | 2 | 5 | .98 |
| 08 | -- | -- | 2 | 5 | 4 | 10 | 22 | 55 | 12 | 30 | .72 |
| 09 | 1 | 2.5 | 4 | 10 | 6 | 15 | 22 | 55 | 7 | 17.5 | .80 |
| 10 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 15 | 16 | 40 | 11 | 27.5 | 5 | 12.5 | .98 |
| 11 | 1 | 2.5 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 7.5 | 22 | 55 | 12 | 30 | .76 |
| 12 | 1 | 2.5 | 3 | 7.5 | 14 | 35 | 12 | 30 | 10 | 25 | .98 |
| 13 | 1 | 2.5 | 2 | 5 | 12 | 30 | 15 | 37.5 | 10 | 25 | .64 |
| 14 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 20 | 18 | 45 | 8 | 20 | 4 | 10 | .90 |
| 15 | -- | -- | 2 | 5 | 1 | 2.5 | 12 | 30 | 25 | 62.5 | .82 |

In addition, the majority of students agreed (35%) or strongly agreed (50%) with Statement 1 (*I can access extra information more easily during an online class*) and expressed a clear preference (Agree to Strongly Agree: 92.5%) for online classes to traditional ones (Statement 15: *I prefer online to traditional face-to-face lessons for EFL classes*). This finding might suggest that the wider the range of online activities, the more interesting its processing could have become for young EFL learners.

Regarding participants' preference of on-line activities, the analysis showed that wikis ranked first in the frequency list with a mean of 82%, followed by *Skype* meetings (78%), on-line quizzes (72%), *Flickr* digital library (68%) and *YouTube* space (65%). This strengthens the view that not only the range but also students' prior familiarity with specific online applications could have increased their levels of self-confidence and motivation when

expected to use them in an educational context. On the average, participants also reported feelings of reduced anxiety (Statement 3: *An online class is a stress-free environment to learn English* (Agree: 60%, Strongly Agree: 12.5%); increased self-confidence (Statement 12: *I have become a better problem-solver after using the computer while learning English* (Agree: 30% & Strongly Agree: 25%) along with Statement 13: *The online EFL course has helped me become an independent learner* (Agree: 37.5% & Strongly Agree: 25%). It is worth mentioning that the statement that ranked first in the frequency list was Statement 8: *I can practice all language skills in an online class* (Agree: 70%), followed by Statement 15: *I prefer online to traditional face-to-face lessons for EFL classes* (Strongly Agree: 62.5%) and Statement 1: *I can access extra information more easily during an online class.* (Strongly Agree: 50%).

3.3. Student attitude towards online EFL reading classes

In order to identify learners' attitudes towards the use of online classes for the development of their reading comprehension competence, five related statements (statements 16-20) were included in the questionnaire. As demonstrated in Table 2, the highest frequency score was 70% (Agree) for Item 16: *It is easy to access the meaning of words (e.g., use online dictionaries, pictures) to help me understand what I read in my online EFL classes*, and for Item 19: *Reading via computers is more interesting when supported with visual information* (Strongly Agree: 50%). These findings can be partly attributed to the fact that, since online reading classes included annotated texts and electronic dictionary use, students had the opportunity to overcome any vocabulary difficulties while processing their online texts or answering reading questions. The fact that visual information ranked high in their preference strengthens the view that visual information, which is easily presented via computers, could be supportive throughout the reading comprehension process.

Table 2: Student attitude towards online reading classes.

| Statements | Strongly disagree | | Disagree | | Not sure | | Agree | | Strongly agree | | SD |
|------------|-------------------|-----|----------|-----|----------|----|-------|----|----------------|----|-----|
| | Freq | % | Freq. | % | Freq | % | Freq | % | Freq | % | |
| 16 | 1 | 2.5 | 1 | 2.5 | 4 | 10 | 28 | 70 | 6 | 15 | .98 |
| 17 | 1 | 2.5 | 1 | 2.5 | 22 | 55 | 12 | 30 | 4 | 10 | .80 |
| 18 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 15 | 8 | 20 | 14 | 35 | 10 | 25 | .82 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|---|-----|---|-----|---|-----|----|------|----|------|-----|
| 19 | 1 | 2.5 | 1 | 2.5 | 3 | 7.5 | 15 | 37.5 | 20 | 50 | .88 |
| 20 | 1 | 2.5 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 22 | 55 | 13 | 32.5 | .92 |

On the other hand, the lowest frequency score (Strongly Agree: 10%) was for Item 17: *In EFL reading courses, listening to the written text helps me comprehend it better*. This can be partly explained by the fact that when a text was difficult for readers to comprehend, audio support did not facilitate comprehension as it was of no support to learners' lexico-grammatical problems.

4. Concluding remarks

Without doubt, it has repeatedly been stated that the use of open on-line technologies can help foreign language learners enhance their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills while practicing their critical thinking and collaboration skills through their participation in online discussion forums (Archambault & Crippen, 2009; Gregor & Cuskelly, 1994; Yang, 2009). In agreement with previous studies, the findings of the present small-scale research further support the view that students seem to have a positive attitude towards integrating CALL into their learning. According to Ayres (2002:247), "learners appreciate and value the learning that they do using the computers"; similarly, Bulut and AbuSeileek (2006) also reported highly positive attitudes towards online English language learning. Moreover, following the claim that "students should like and favor the subject or the activities in the learning environment in order to develop positive attitudes toward learning" (Almahboub, 2000: 66), the findings of the present study suggest that as intermediate Greek EFL learners' attitudes were generally positive, they enjoyed the computer-based activities designed.

The current study has, however, presented a number of challenges and limitations, especially regarding the Student Attitude Questionnaire. While it has provided useful insights into learners' perceptions of online classes, we must be wary of the limitations of young student-opinion data as, at best, these data indicated trends in perceived strategy use. Moreover, other attitudes that were not included in the questionnaire might have been present, or even that the reported ones might have been used more or less often than participants indicated. The fact that a large number of responses were collected, following a standardized set of procedures, could, however, add to the validity of the present findings.

Finally, the online class components and the set of pertinent online activities used in the present study complemented the learning objectives of the actual curriculum, while exposing learners to authentic material and engaging them in real-life tasks.

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APPENDIX 1 – CALL Attitude Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. Please answer the questionnaire as honestly as you can. Don't try to write what you think your teacher wants you to write; tell us what you really think.

Section One**Background Information**

Age:.....

Gender (please circle): Male Female

Place of residence:.....

Name of your school:.....

How long have you been learning English? :.....

What is your level in English? (please circle) A1 A2 B 1 B2 C1 C2

Have you taken English lessons in-group? (please circle) YES NO

Have you ever taken any private English lessons? (please circle) YES NO

Have you ever taken an exam in English? (please circle) YES NO

If yes, which one?If yes, when?

Did you pass it?If yes, what was your score?

Do you own a Personal Computer (PC)? Yes [] No []

How proficient are you in using computers?

Very weak [] Weak [] Average [] Good [] Very good []

Have you passed a Computer Educational Course? Yes [] No []

How often do you use computers? Please circle the appropriate option.

- A. Less than once a week
- B. 1-2 times a week
- C. 3-4 times a week
- D. 5 or more times a week

What do you use computers for? Please circle the appropriate options.

- A. Electronic mail
- B. Computer games
- C. Online shopping
- D. School projects
- E. Voice chat (Skype)
- F. Personal site or web blog
- G. Post Wikis
- H. Watch YouTube videos

Section Two

For the following 20 statements, please tick [✓] the answer that best reflects your opinion. Please note that there are NO right or wrong answers to the statements.

1. I can access extra information more easily during an online class.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

2. After taking an online EFL course, I know how to benefit from my PC to improve my English language competence.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

3. An online class is a stress-free environment to learn English.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

4. I can get more feedback in online classes.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

5. An online course is an interesting way of learning English.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

6. I benefit more from the group/pair work in an online class.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

7. I feel comfortable enough to share my ideas in English during online classes.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

8. I can practice all language skills in an online environment.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

9. I know more about how to use computers after having taken an online EFL course.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

10. I can understand everything we do in our online EFL class.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

11. It takes less time to explain something during an online EFL lesson.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

12. I have become a better problem-solver after using the computer while learning English.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

13. The online EFL course has helped me become an independent learner.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

14. I do not have technical problems in using computers during online classes.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

15. I prefer online to traditional face-to-face lessons for EFL classes.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

16. It is easy to access the meaning of words (e.g., use online dictionaries, pictures) to help me understand what I read in my online EFL classes.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

17. In EFL reading courses, listening to the written text helps me comprehend better.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

18. I prefer to practice EFL reading comprehension via computers.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

19. Reading via computers is more interesting when supported with visual information.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].

20. It is easier to go back and forth in the online text to find relationships among ideas in it.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Not sure [] Agree [] Strongly agree [].