PRACTICE IN PRACTICE, NOT IN THEORY: HOW BLENDED LEARNING SUPPORTS INTAKE IN EFL CLASSES

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Abstract

The authors are involved in developing a new EFL program for engineering students at a university in Japan. Even if we aim at improving their communicative ability in English, providing our students with output activities only can rarely be productive. Especially when most of the students are low aptitude and filled with discouragement and disappointment in learning, they need to be instructed properly and be fostered in acquiring skills through appropriate practices in appropriate order. Because the time with us, however, is limited to once a week in most cases, we endeavor to build the learning foundation and strategies through blended learning. We attempt to provide students opportunities to practice as much as possible so that they can acquire learning skills to apply in their future efforts even beyond the EFL classroom. This paper focuses on how our blended learning enhances opportunities for the students to intake the target language both in and beyond classrooms. It also discusses the roles of teachers in deciding how to blend learning choices, improving the quality of instruction, and providing appropriate tasks necessary with appropriate material adaptation.

1 Introduction

When English is one of the subjects engineering students have avoided for a long time, what can EFL teachers do to break their silence and motivate them to deal with language learning? Since 2014, the authors have been carrying out an action research project to develop motivational strategies and to design an instructional framework to provide students with opportunities to re-build trust in EFL. One of the most important goals in the courses in the first two years of three-year curriculum is to support students filled with discouragements and disappointments in English learning to move beyond past failures. This paper will demonstrate the efforts in establishing blended learning in the first two years of the recent curriculum to suit the students' proficiency, to optimize potentials of learners, teachers and resources in order to activate learning with special attention given to material adaptation and the essential roles of teachers in the practice of lessons and courses in blending the learning.

2 Curriculum Design
2.1 Background

As is often the case with most universities in Japan, weekly schedule of engineering students does not allow much for language classes; classes only meet once a week. Proficiency in English upon entering our university ranges from A0 toA2, with the biggest group in A0, if converted to CEFR levels. Among seven EFL teachers in the Language Center, only the limited number of teachers can accommodate the teaching allocation, which means the size of the classes are likely to be large. The classroom availability is another issue as well. On the other hand, the goal of the curriculum as hoped by the department, is to bring most of the students up to A2 level and above before they graduate. In the field of robotics engineering, for example, being able to communicate in English has become essential to work on projects with people from all over the world. Thus, the department hopes the students to become able to speak English and make presentations in English in their field of expertise in the long term. With such little time and large class given, and with the existence of such a substantial gap between the proficiency and goal, what should language teachers prioritize in teaching?

2.2 Principles

2.2.1 Goals

Given the environment and needs issues above, a new curriculum for the department of robotic science and technology, established in 2014, has been designed and launched. The goals for the first year are as follows:

a. To reduce negative images and attitudes toward English learning

b. To develop basic listening skills and willingness to communicate

c. To go forward toward A1 level at least

d. To start developing themselves as self-regulated learners

e. To start developing cross-cultural readiness and awareness

The goals for the second year adds two more:

f. To value language acquisition and broaden their linguistic viewpoints

g. To develop themselves as autonomous learners beyond credits and classes

2.2.2 Placement and class size

The students in this department are placed according to the scores on CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication) given at the beginning of the school year. CASEC examines proficiency levels in vocabulary, expression, grammar, listening and dictation only within 40 minutes in computer adaptive testing. CASEC was selected because it confines low-motivated students only for about 40 minutes with questions reachable for them to answer. After this placement, the classes are divided into 4, with around 20 students each, which may be considered as "small" in most universities in Japan. Thorough discussion with the faculty of the department resulted in adding one extra class for the lowest cluster of students, which brought about two 90-minute classes in a row to make lessons more intensive than meeting twice a week.

2.2.3 Focuses

The most important principle of the curriculum is never to force students forward in haste. The first two years of the curriculum aim primarily at accommodating students with an encouraging, energizing learning experience designed to activate their English learning. Too many expectations and goals set
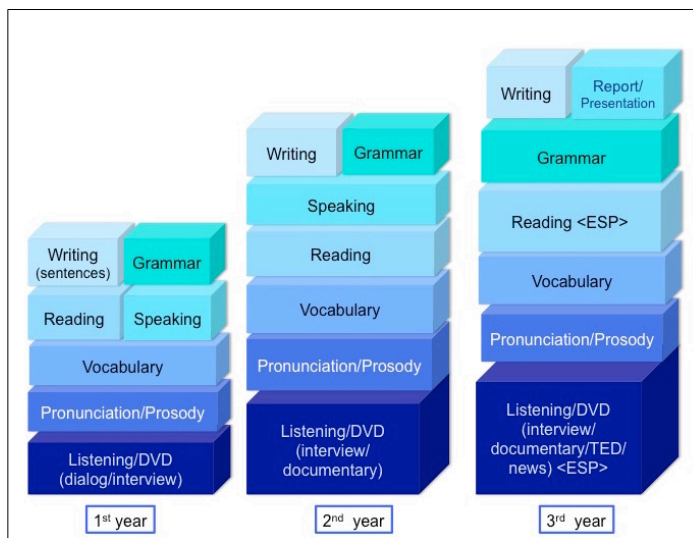
Figure 1. Focuses of EFL learning each year

too high,　especially at the beginning,　would allow the students to turn away again, as they might have done before.

Figure 1 shows focuses of learning for each year.　Building listening skills is prioritized as a whole, starting from dialogs on personal to social issues in the first year, and move onto listening documentary, speech, presentation and news. Putting priority on listening aims at increasing fluency with which learners can use the language they already know first receptively and productively. (Nation, 2010)　With the goal of supporting the students to become prepared to be communicative and productive in the target language in the long term, the beginning first phase of the language development focuses on the sound.

There is another reason behind this; most students in the department have less experience to listen and to utter the target language in classes so far, which means they are likely to have been discouraged more in their past learning experiences. Another reason for prioritizing listening skill development is it requires sufficient time and efficient scaffolding to encourage low-motivated learners not to refuse listening.　With a focus on listening, the courses for the first two years integrate the sound of the target language, vocabulary and grammar in use so that the students can increase expectancy to succeed in learning to communicate in English in the long term. The focuses are accumulated, recycled and enhanced toward the third year when ESP begins. By the time the students take the ESP course, they are expected not to refuse materials in English either spoken or written. Although their linguistic skills and knowledge can still be limited, the students are expected to be able to embark for

using English also in their specialty from the third year.

2.2.4 Classes

When classes meet only once a week, some teachers may disregard the lesson time because once-a-week class is not sufficient to teach anything. Others, though, may attempt to utilize the lesson time as a starting point of learning.   The curriculum sees classes for the first two years as imperative opportunities not only to provide instructions but also to decide on the most favorable sequencing of lessons through close observation of students in carrying out activities.   As face-to-face lessons are considered to be the core of the course, we divide 90-minute classes into half and implement a dual system: two teachers and two places for one class. Table 1 and 2 shows how classes are allocated for the first two years.

As table 1 shows, the first year A/B classes have 45 minute-lessons with two Japanese native speaker teachers (JT) in two different learning environments: CALL and workshop types of rooms. The dual system is implemented because it allows the students to experience both online and offline learning environments and two different types of teachers. As for the first year C/D classes, extra 90 minutes are added to a regular program, which accommodates the classes to learn and practice the target language with more time.

Table 2 explains how the second year A to D classes are coordinated with two types of environments, Language Lab (LL) and workshop room, and two different teachers. The second year course is taught by one ET(English native speaker teacher) and two JTs. No additional program is set for the lowest proficiency group in the second year because for two reasons; 1) the students are expected to experience enough training in the first year to carry out their extra online practices independently in the second year, and 2) the tight weekly schedule for the second year students does not allow more English classes to fit in. In order to prepare the students first to communicate in the target language first, JTs use their first language to support learning in classes. The two-year compulsory courses aims at letting the students become ready to communicate in the target language first.   In the second year, the students are increasingly encouraged to apply the skills and knowledge learned in the first year.

Table 1. Class coordination for the year 1 course

Year	Day	Classes	Lesson time Min./week	Facility Teacher	
1	Tue 1	A	45+45	CALL JT 1	Workshop JT 2
		B	45+45	Workshop JT 2	CALL JT 1
	Thu 4&5	C D	90+90	CALL JT 1 JT 2	

Table 2. Class coordination for the year 2 course

Year	Day	Classes	Lesson time Min./week	Facility Teacher	
2	Mon 3	B	45+45	Workshop ET 1	LL JT 1
		D	45+45	LL JT 1	Workshop ET 1
	Tue 3	A	45+45	Workshop ET 1	LL JT 2
		C	45+45	LL JT 2	Workshop ET 1

3 Blended Learning

Both in and out of the classrooms, this curriculum seeks the ways to provide the students with sufficient opportunities to practice the focus of the language lessons. Acquiring practical skills in the target language requires sufficient trainings, but with low-aptitude, high-anxiety and weakly-motivated students, the teachers need to equip the students with continual supports to motivate them as well as to keep them motivated. Oguri and Kato (2015) viewed blended learning as blending the following elements:

1) offline and online activities

2) output tasks and input tasks

3) pair/group work and individual work

4) technology and people

5) teachers and teachers

6) facilities and facilities
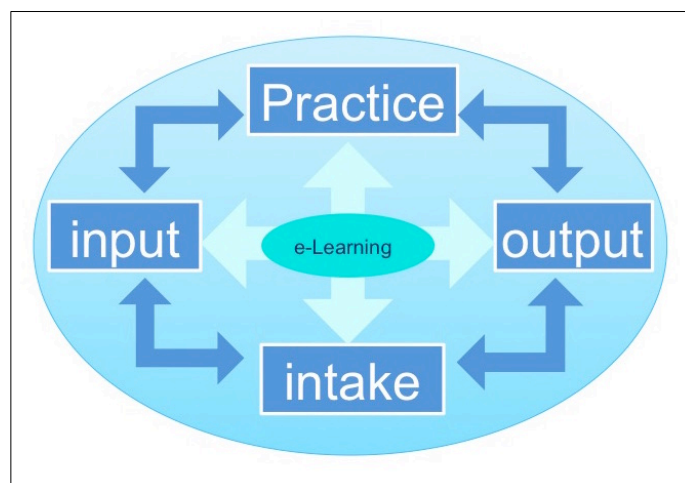
Figure 2. Role of e-Learning in EFL acquisition

Figure 2 shows how e-Learning is recognized in the curriculum. Acquiring practical skills in the target language requires input and output, but to be able to output, learners needs to practice the target items. While outputting, learners recognize another need to practice or input. Intake occurs when learners have sufficient practices and outputting, but learners still go back and forth through input, practice and output until they become confident of their target attained.

Because "Students are not motivated to learn unless they regard the material they are taught as worth learning" (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011) the curriculum decided to adopt two types of e-Learning material: 1) ATR CALL BRIX, a huge volume of web-based training course for building basic listening and speaking skills, and 2) Glexa, a web platform for creating learning materials and LMS. ATR CALL BRIX provides students with opportunities to learn and practice graded vocabulary as well as sample sentences where the target vocabulary repetitively appears. It enables the students to be familiar with the sound of English, parts of speech, and sentence structure. It also lets students enunciate and record vocabulary and sentences, and see the evaluation of the recording. When the lesson time is limited, such an individual trainings can be carried out abundantly and without feeling embarrassed of being heard at the students' own pace outside the classroom.

Glexa enables teachers to adapt the course book easily.   The following textbooks are adopted for the first and second year courses: 1)*World Link Intro and 1, Cengage Learning*, for the first year, and 2)*World English Intro, 1 and 2, Cengage Leraning*, for the second year. With a permission from the publisher, tasks and exercises are arranged and adapted from the materials above using Glexa. The platform enables the teachers to provide various tasks and exercises most adequate for the students'

motivation, developmental stages, progress and intake.

It also lets teachers create assignments and set the dues as well as how many times student are allowed to practice. Glexa's LMS supports teachers to closely monitor how each student progresses in the course.

Used in class, Glexa enables teachers to reduce the time for checking the correct answers, which leads to efficient use of limited time given to each lesson. If tasks are given in appropriate order, students do not have to wait for others to finish the task assigned or for their answers to be marked.   For example, those students proceed in a task earlier than other students do not have to wait for others to finish. Students who need more time on a task than others, on the other hand, can spend enough time on the task and do not have to worry about keeping up with faster students. Using Glexa in class thus enables teachers to improve the quality and intensity of the lesson time while finding out how students progress. In the first year course, in-class use of Glexa in CALL supports the students to use beyond classrooms. It expands opportunities for the students to learn, reflect, review and enhance what they learn in class at their own pace any time, any where.

4 Roles of Teachers

Roles of teachers start to evolve after the curriculum is launched. Compared to the traditional model of language learning where learners are expected to absorb knowledge and have little practices both in and out of classrooms, today's practical courses aiming at acquiring certain language skills and fluency tend to require teachers to face increased roles.   The number of teachers' roles increases in accordance with the number of elements including technology added to the list of teaching resources. Through practicing the new curriculum for two years, Oguri and Kato (2015) highlighted important roles of teachers in blended learning as follows:

      a.   To understand learners' behaviors and progress

      b.   To pay attention to learners' process of acquisition

      c.   To adapt learning materials most suitable for the learners

      d.   To build relationship with learners

      e.   To build relationship with other teachers

Ogruri and Kato (2016) pointed out the roles of teachers in blended learning can be categorized into two fields as follows:

1) Resource related roles

    a.   To coordinate resources

    b.   To enhance learning opportunities (intrinsically rewarding)

    c.   To optimize potentials of learning materials

    d.   To optimize potentials of learner energy

    e.   To decide when and how to blend technology to support or enhance learning

2) Instruction related roles

    a.   To prevent lessons from getting tiring or boring

    b.   To promote both interactive and inner-active learning

    c.   To promptly observe the learning process

    d.   To structure and re-structure instructions in more appropriate or effective ways

While planning, preparing, putting into practice, observing and reflecting, the roles of teachers as listed above continuously occur, sometimes in multiple.
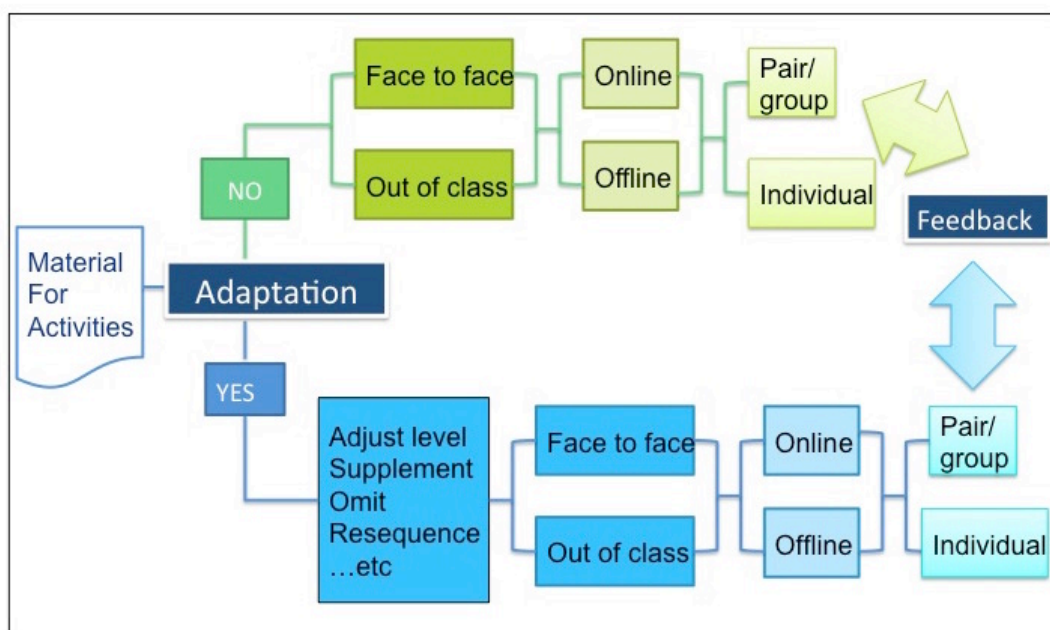
**Figure 3. Increased alternatives teachers face**

Figure 3 demonstrates how blended learning increases alternatives for teachers in lesson preparation. This flow is likely to occur for every tasks teachers plan before the lesson as well as during the lesson.

Planning examples will be discussed in details in the presentation.

5 Conclusion

The blended learning implemented in this new curriculum aims at letting the students increase their self-efficacy so that they will feel more positive toward carrying out self-regulated learning beyond classrooms. Blending technology only, however, does not seem to improve students' aptitude in learning because technology no longer functions as extrinsic motivation. If the time for learning English is limited in and out of classes, the first responsibility of the teachers is to optimize the lesson hours. The more technology is available in or around classrooms, the more options teachers face to choose from to make most of what we carry out in face-to-face classes.

In Spring 2016, the authors conducted a survey on learning English to find out what the students have felt in the newly developed curriculum. Figure 3 shows the result of the students' response to the question whether or not their feelings toward learning English have changed. After one or two year experience in the curriculum, 74% replied that they feel the changes while 26% still seem not to recognize the change.
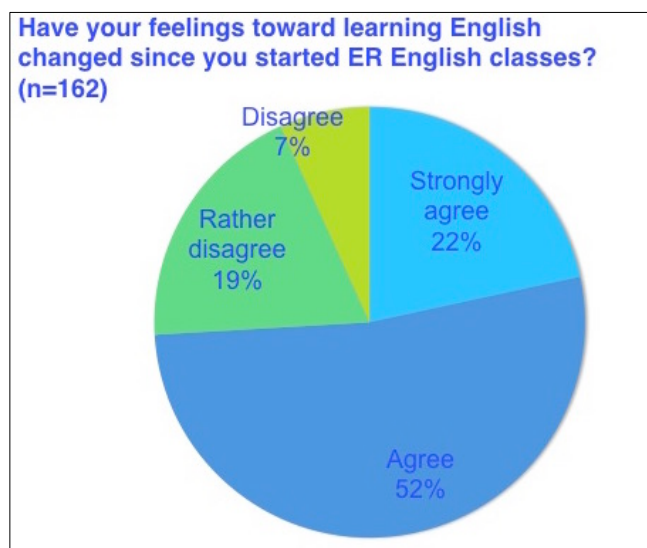
Figure 4. Survey result 1: Changes in feelings

Figure 4 shows the result of the responses to the question on what gave influence on their English so far. The first year students after one semester's experience with the curriculum with the students in

the second and third year replied as shown in the figure. The classes came first followed by trainings on ATR CALL BRIX and Glexa.
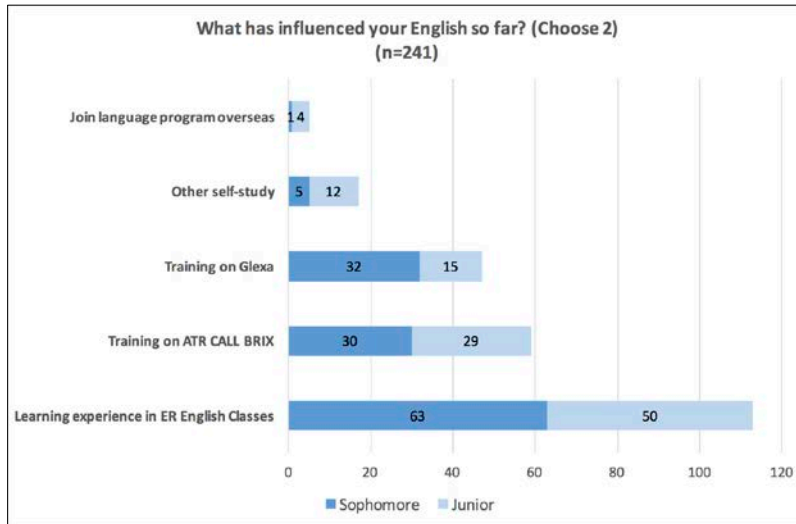

Figure 5.   Survey Result 2: influencing factors

Figure 5 shows the changes in CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication) test scores of the 2014 students after one year of English learning experience with the new curriculum.
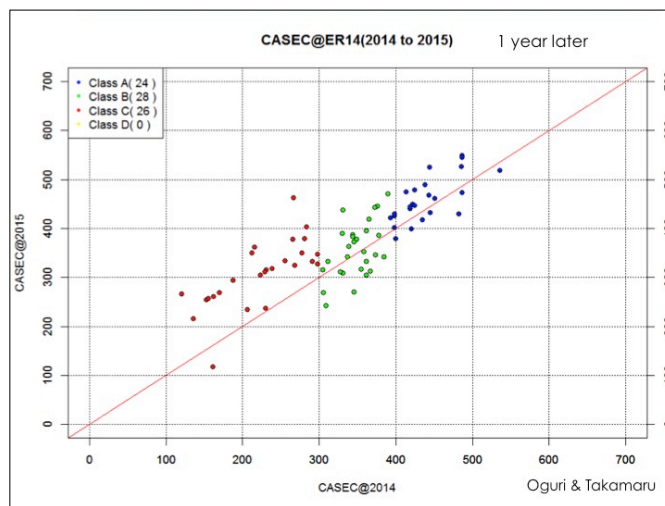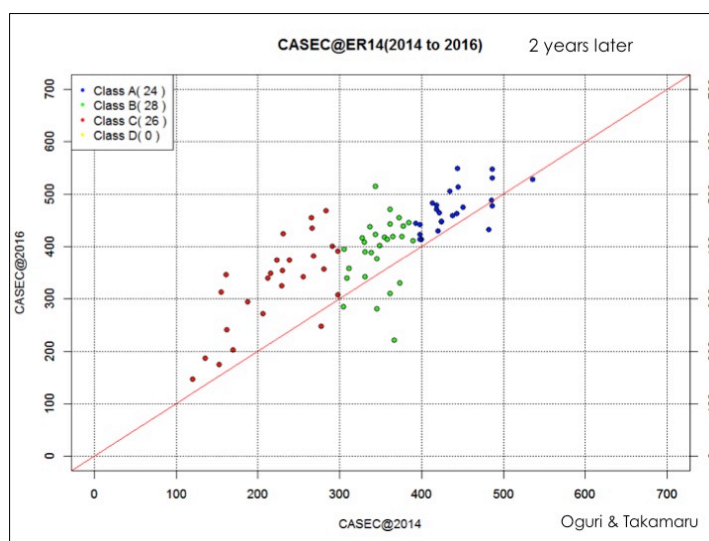

Figure 6.   CASEC score improvement (1 year later)

Out of 78 students in class of 2014, about 74% of the students succeeded to improve their scores. Upon entering the department, 99% of them replied they do not like to study English. For the students with negative feeling toward learning English, the first year course seems to have cast some impact on changing their attitude thus the their efforts in overcoming their past undesirable experiences are

reflected on the improvement of the scores.

Figure 7.   CASEC score improvement (2 years later)

Figure 7   shows their changes two years later. After two years, 88% of the students of 2014 improved their scores.   Some modifications have been added to pedagogy and collaboration among teachers have been strengthened since the beginning of our blended learning.   The detailed results of the survey 2016 Spring and further outcomes of the courses,   as well as some of the difficulties will be shared in our presentation.

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