

A Study on EFL Students' Use of E-Learning Programs for Learning English —Taking a Taiwanese University as an Example

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Abstract

With its characteristics of repeated practice and easy review, e-Learning programs have been hailed as an effective way for learning foreign languages nowadays. Supported by ICT (Information & Communication Technology), e-Learning offers students self-paced learning whereby learners can control their schedules and it is presumed to be a round-the-clock teaching aid to EFL students. As many scholars anticipate that e-Learning will become a future trend in EFL, more and more higher education institutions are investing money on English e-Learning programs in the hope that students' English proficiency will be further upgraded by using the ubiquitous system. After investigating students' frequency of using English e-learning programs in a local university in Taipei, the author argues in this paper that e-Learning programs do not benefit EFL students to the degree as we anticipated given the fact that cold technology and machines can never successfully become a "facilitator" that should be played by a teacher. (Harmer, 2000) After all, technology can never take the place of the teacher, who is thought to be the most crucial element of any teaching activities.

Keywords: Information & Communication Technology (ICT), E-learning, EFL teaching

1. Introduction

With the advent of computer technology, e-Learning has played an increasingly important role; especially in higher education as more and more college students rely on computers for learning and many higher education institutions are using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to develop course materials, deliver and share the course content, lectures and presentations, facilitate communication among lecturers and students, conduct research and provide administrative and management services.

E-learning is closely associated with ICT, and the former will achieve nothing without the support of the latter. Therefore, when we talk about e-learning, ICT will automatically come into our mind. ICT can support learning in a number of ways. "It can facilitate communication, increase access to information, provide greater access to learning for students with special educational needs, model and stimulate a range of scientific phenomena, and generally motivate students, develop problem solving capabilities and aid deeper understanding" (Selinger, 2001, p. 42). With so many advantages, ICT has soon captured the attention of educators and is seen as an essential and urgent investment in higher education by school authorities.

Undeniably, in this climate of educational and societal changes surrounding the introduction of ICT and e-learning, "the teacher often falls between two classifications—that of a conservative resister of change, or that of a pioneer and interpreter of change" (Watson, 2003, p.30). It is understandable why many teachers have mixed feeling towards ICT and e-learning. In one way, they want to use the technology to lessen their teaching workload, as "using technology effectively in the classroom will enable teachers to be more successful" (Means & Olson, 1993, p. 19). On the other hand, they do not want to see their traditional teaching role being taken away by e-learning. However, whether you like it or not, teachers today need to realize that in the computer age, it is an irreversible trend that ICT and e-learning are being integrated into our teaching today.

The use of ICT in English teaching is praised by many language teachers, some even advocating that e-learning is the least expensive and the most effective way for EFL students to learn English as they are able to learn according to their own schedules and are not bothered by economic constraints. Recently, schools of all levels have been encouraged to pour money into the establishment of e-learning systems to assist English learning in the hope that students' English proficiency will be quickly improved.

The purpose of this study is to find out whether e-learning programs do benefit EFL students in their learning of English to the degree anticipated. Following the introduction, a literature review will cover the pros and cons of ICT and e-learning. The methods used in this study will be described in section three. Section four will give details of the data collection and analysis. Results and discussion will be elaborated in section five. Finally, the conclusion will evaluate the significance of the findings in section six. One of the limitations of this study is that, due to the constraints of time and budget, it was not able to take a comprehensive sample from students of various colleges/universities around the country.

2. Literature Review

With the development of internet and computer technology, e-Learning has received a great deal of attention since the 1990s and has also become an important focus in the field of education (Brown and Johnson-Shull, 2000; Cerny and Heines, 2001). Because of its convenience and easy accessibility, schools of all levels have made significant commitments to the procurement of e-Learning programs for English learning in the hope that students' English proficiency will be further improved.

2.1 What is "E-Learning"

Today, when we are used to enjoying the convenience of e-Learning programs, few of us actually realize what e-Learning entails. For this question, answers vary. According to Palloff and Pratt, "Electronic learning or e-Learning is a general term used to refer to computer-based learning" (1999, pp. 15-6). He believes that e-Learning has introduced a whole new set of physical, emotional and psychological issues along with educational issues.

Another definition of e-Learning given by the European e-Learning Action Plan, is as follows: "the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration." ICT first emerged as new concepts, tools and resources in communication and few teachers ever realized that it would be widely applied and even bring revolutionary changes to education.

Regarding the close relation of ICT and e-Learning, Clark asserts that "e-Learning is a general term covering many different approaches that have in common the use of information and communication technology" (2004, p. 2). Even though there are many other terms for e-learning, its ICT-based nature is unchanged. Jones puts it this way, "e-learning, digital learning, computer enhanced learning, no matter which tag is applied, all aim to exploit web-based technology to improve learning for students" (2003, p. 66). With its features of convenience and easy accessibility supported by ICT, e-Learning can simply be viewed as: "online access to learning resources, anywhere and anytime" (Holmes, 2006, p. 14).

2.2 Advantages of "E-Learning"

Today, e-Learning could no longer be seen as a collection of tools for improving teaching and learning. As Dowling & Lai argue, "it has brought a profound transformation and teachers are the main agents of this transformation" (2003, p. 64). Knowing about this, teachers today should not expect that the presence of new technologies will greatly help students' learning; however, they can be assured that technology if integrated into effective teaching and learning practices will enforce students' learning motivation.

The integration of ICT and teaching has made e-Learning possible. When teachers start to replace a piece of chalk with a mouse, a pedagogical revolution is silently taking place. Normally, when teachers talk about e-Learning, they are used to separating technology from teaching, and they like to take themselves as teaching "professionals" rather than computer "technicians". However, they are advised that "Technology and pedagogy should be considered together, as it is pointless, from a pedagogical point of view, to make ICT-based tools available if the educational strategies, and the activities the learners engage in, are not suitably revised" (Bottino, 2002, p. 93).

Of course, modern teachers are not supposed to be technicians, but they are required to have basic knowledge of computers. Only after they know the capabilities and limitations of ICT can they make the most of e-learning. It is widely presumed that ICT provides new opportunities for both teachers and students to enrich their teaching and learning experiences through virtual environments. The most important aspect of all is that it can support learning in a number of ways.

For the benefits of e-learning, Clarke asserts that learners have freedom of choice over "place, pace and time" (2004, p. 32). Lipshitz & Parsons also indicate that "key advantages of e-learning are flexibility, convenience and the ability to study at one's own pace at any time and any place where an internet connection is available" (2008, p. 64). The main benefit of e-learning lies in its extension of the limits in time and space for language learning which is what traditional teaching fails to achieve.

Nowadays, students are able to have considerable degree of choice over place and time in learning and they are also able to decide how much to learn as long as they have access to computer and internet. Apart from the flexibility and convenience, e-Learning also provides opportunity for “repeated practice and ease of review” (Long, 2004, p. 69), which are essential in the learning of foreign languages.

2.3 Disadvantages of “E-Learning”

“One disadvantage of e-learning is the lack of face to face interaction” (Bjork, Ottosson and Thorsteinsdottir, 2008, p. 142). e-learning provides a virtual learning environment to learners, in other words, students can only get online guidance and direction, and this “leads to the lack of teacher supervision which traditional teaching can provide” (Wang, 2007, p. 38). As face to face teaching is impossible in an e-Learning environment, student’s confusion and complaints therefore can’t be dealt with immediately.

Another problem of e-learning is that web and software development can be expensive and schools of all levels might have to invest much money in it if they want to have a sound e-learning system. Noteworthy is that countries that are not in the “rich men club” will lag far behind and even be excluded in the most up-to date pedagogical techniques. Even in a wealthy country like the UK, only 48% of households have Internet access (Catherall, 2005, p. 18). Without the installment of an effective and reliable Internet system, it is anticipated that e-Learning can’t achieve the success to the degree as we anticipate.

Finally, technological problems might be another factor we need to address in e-learning. “Even students with extensive technology experience can become confused and lost on the Web” (Roberts, 2004, p. 77). To encourage learners to use e-learning programs, technicians need to work out more user-friendly systems.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Major methods used include interviews and questionnaires. Data were all collected from teachers and students of the Applied English Department of a Polytechnic University located in the suburbs of Taipei, Taiwan in 2010.

3.2 Participants

123 senior students in three different classes were included in the questionnaire survey. In terms of their education and age, they are quite a homogeneous group. 76 of these students held an A1 or A2 certificate (Elementary Level) determined from various English proficiency tests, like General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), TOEIC, or IELTS, 30 held a B1 (Pre-intermediate Level) certificate and 17 a B2 (Intermediate Level) certificate. Based on their English level, students were assigned to three different groups. Students in Group A were those holding an A1 or A2 certificate. Students in Group B had a B1 certificate and students in Group C a B2 certificate. (for details, see Figure One)

Apart from students, ten teachers (including two English native-speaking teachers and eight Chinese teachers) were interviewed to get their view on English e-Learning programs. As for educational background, seven of the ten teachers held a doctoral degree (two from local universities and the other five from foreign universities). Eight of the ten teachers had more than five years teaching experience and the other two over ten years.

At present, there are five on-line English learning programs in the university’s homepage, and those programs were procured in the short span of six years. Why does the university need to have so many English e-learning programs? In order to further understand the procurement policy and decisions of English e-learning programs in the university, an interview was conducted with the incumbent Director of Applied English Department and the Director of the Language Center and also their predecessors so as to have a comprehensive picture of the university’s procurement policy of English e-learning programs.

3.3 Instruments

The instruments used in this study include a questionnaire, in which students were first asked to provide their background information, and then were asked four questions related to their view on e-learning programs for English learning. The survey was conducted from Oct. 4 to Oct. 20, 2010 and was done in three different classes taught by the author. The questionnaire was given to students who were given 10 minutes to complete the survey in class. Of the 141 questionnaires given out, 123 valid ones were returned. 12 students were absent on the day, and 6 students refused to answer for various reasons. (For the detailed questionnaire, see Appendix A)

On the other hand, in conducting an interview with teachers, the interview question outline (See Appendix B) was formulated beforehand, then each interviewee spent 30-40 minutes with the interviewer to answer the first 6 questions. However, two teachers with administrative duties were given two more questions on the decision making

policy of procurement of English e-learning programs.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

As mentioned above, this research adopts both quantitative and qualitative methods, data collected was analyzed accordingly. In quantitative research, data collected from a questionnaire was used to analyze students' views on e-learning programs. In qualitative research; on the other hand, teachers' views on those programs were gathered through interviews.

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

At present, there are five English e-learning programs on the homepage of the university's website: AMC E-Learning, E-Touch, Easy Test, APPC TOEIC and English/Japanese Self Taught. Almost each one or two years, the university procures a new English e-Learning program. Most of the English self-learning software programs bought by the university contain both teaching materials and also test banks for TOEIC and GEPT except APPC TOEIC, which only provides 12 TOEIC simulation tests. Of the 123 students who answered the questionnaires, almost 85% (104) had used E-touch, and 37% (45) had used Easy-Test. As for the other three e-learning programs, only 16% (20) of the students had used APPC TOEIC, 15% (19) of the students used AMC E-Learning and none of the students ever used English/Japanese Self Taught. In other words, those e-learning programs were seldom used and were even unknown to the students of this university. (for details, see Table 1)

As for the frequency of usage, of the 123 students, none used the e-learning programs every day, and only one used those programs 20-30 times/month. Three students indicated that they used 10-20 times/month, and 42 students used those programs 3-10 times/month and 66 students admitted that they used the programs less than 3 times/ month. To my surprise, 11 students had never used the programs. (for details, see Table 2)

If we further analyze the data, we can find an interesting phenomenon—high level students used e-learning programs less than low level students. Of the 17 B2 students, only 5 used the programs more than three times a month (29%). However, 10 of the 30 B1 students (33%) and 31 of the 76 A1 & A2 students (40%) did so.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data was mainly taken from interviews conducted with the ten faculty members of the English department. Two of the ten teachers had administrative duties, and the other eight were normal teachers evenly chosen from year one to year four classes. Two of the normal teachers were native English speakers and the other six were Chinese English teachers. Eight of the ten teachers did use university e-learning programs as supplementary teaching materials in class and four of them asked their students to do English on-line tests.

Most of the teachers (except one) did not understand why there were five on-line English learning programs on the homepage of this university, and were loath to switch to a different e-learning program each year. As for the question whether the e-learning programs benefit students' English proficiency and are helpful for them to get relevant language proficiency certificates, answers varied. Six teachers agreed that e-learning programs are helpful, but the other four held the opposite view.

On the question whether the university has spent enough money in English e-learning programs, eight out of ten faculty members believed it has, and the director of the Language Center even provided detailed information on the 2004-10 budget on English e-learning programs invested in by the university shown in Figure 2.

However, eight out of the ten teachers complained that they had received little training on how to use the English e-learning programs even though a couple of training workshops were held prior to the installment of each program, and they argued that their questions could not be solved just by attending one or two training sessions. In order to gain familiarity with the technology, they needed to spend much of their free time, and the more complicated the technology, the more time they required to gain competence in it.

All the teachers interviewed frankly pointed out that their students didn't spend enough time on those English e-Learning programs, even though they had tried hard to persuade their students to use in class. When asked whether the school should incorporate on-line teaching materials in the mid-term and final tests as a way to encourage and motivate students to use those programs, eight of the ten teachers believed that this approach might be a good and effective way to increase students' incentive to use those self-learning programs. The two teachers holding the opposite view; however, asserted that e-Learning programs are designed to attract students' interest in learning, and they should not be used as an evaluation tool.

5. Results and Discussion

For long, e-learning programs have been thought to be the best tool for foreign language learning as they avoid the limitations set on the space and time available to the individual learner, and most important of all, they provide EFL

students a chance for repeated practice. However, from the data collected and analyzed above, the findings of this study might not agree with the ideas on English e-learning programs. In the following, we are going to further discuss the findings of this research.

5.1 Students' Autonomous Learning is Crucial to E-Learning

There is mounting evidence to show that e-learning allows learners to take ownership over the learning process (Chong, 1998). When learning is not limited to the classroom and lacks the supervision of teachers, autonomous learning becomes the most dominant element of e-learning (Doherty, 1998). Clearly, the “learn anytime, anywhere, by anyone” mentality definitely requires learner’s motivation to ensure its success.

Contrary to the myth that easy accessibility of English e-learning programs will greatly motivate EFL students, our investigation shows that even though more than 74% of the students polled (91 of the 123) indicate that e-learning programs do help them improve their English and acquire relevant proficiency certificates, less than 1% of students (10 of the 123) are frequent users (use more than 20 times a month) of the programs which is a far cry from the common expectation. Almost 60% of students (72 out of 123) polled admit that they use those e-learning programs less than 3 times a month, and this finding might be contrary to our anticipation—that students will automatically make use of the programs if they have access to computers and the internet.

The wide availability of the e-learning programs makes learning easier and more convenient. However, e-learning programs won’t be used successfully if students have no intention or strong motivation to use them. In the traditional classroom, students attend classes regularly and their presence is checked and their learning progress is closely monitored by teachers. However, in the e-learning virtual classroom, teachers have no way to supervise students’ learning. Consequently, the success of e-learning depends on students’ motivation.

5.2 More Investment Doesn't Mean Better Achievement

Doubtlessly, e-learning has received the great deal of attention during the last decade and higher education institutes in Taiwan have made significant commitments to the purchasing of English e-learning programs with the expectation that student’s English proficiency would greatly improve. Partly because of the pressure from the Ministry of Education (MOE) which demands that college students need to hold an English proficiency certificate before they complete their college education, more and more Taiwanese higher education institutes have begun to invest significant amount of money on various English e-learning programs.

As we call modern students the “e-generation”, we tend to assume that all students today love and know how to use information and computer technology and have little trouble adapting to using the technology in their learning. On the other hand, we also assume that high level students will use e-learning programs more frequently because the function of repeated practice provided by e-learning is widely thought to be helpful to EFL students’ performance in doing English proficiency tests. Unfortunately those assumptions are wrong, and it is more surprising to find that none of the 21 B2 students in our study used English e-learning programs frequently; and six of them even said that they had never used the programs before.

With the pouring of over 3 million NT dollars into English e-learning programs in the last five years, the university has not seen a sharp increase in the number of students who successfully complete English proficiency tests and this has broken the myth that more investment on the e-learning will greatly help students improve their English proficiency as the system provides a 24- hour -a day and 7- day- a week English learning environment to students.

In the interview, both the directors of English department and the language center are very surprised to know that there are currently five English e-Learning programs on the homepage of this university, and they admit that it is really a waste of money to have five programs which provide the same function at the same time. They attribute it to poor coordination work between now and then as the two directors have taken their current job for less than two years. Both agree that this university need to formulate a policy to encourage students to take advantage of those abundant on-line learning resources provided by the university, and a more comprehensive and rigid plan must be formulated before procuring any e-Learning programs in the future.

5.3 Pre-Service Training and User-Friendly Technology Pave the Way to the Success of E-Learning

Even though faculty and students today have little fear of the technology, they still may lack the skills needed to use e-learning programs effectively. After all, most of the users of the programs are not technicians and computer engineers, and they are definitely having some problems when they first attempt to use the programs. “It should not be assumed that all users will automatically possess IT literacy or familiarity with the Internet” (Catherall, 2005, p. 75). Therefore, prior instruction on how to use some technologies is important.

Unlike a video game, most e-learning programs involve more advanced technology and the users might be scared or

get lost when they first use the programs. How can we expect our teaching staff and students to use the programs if they are struggling with technology problems? The more complicated the technology the more the need to gain competence in using it. To help users gain competence in using e-learning programs, it is absolutely necessary to provide some kinds of pre-service training, like holding workshops or training sessions to educate the user before they access programs.

On the other hand, a user-friendly system will also help motivate the user to use e-learning programs, and in this respect, technology plays an extremely important role. Knapp & Glenn assert that electronic technologies provide one or more of three general roles: providing information, developing knowledge and skills and linking different locations (1996). Teachers, therefore, must make choices about the appropriateness of the technology to meet specific learning outcomes. Whatever roles technology plays in e-learning, we are convinced that the user will try to get information or develop his skills only if he has easy and free access to e-learning programs.

6. Conclusion

As the use of ICT has become more and more popular in English e-learning programs, teachers still need to be warned that technology itself is not a panacea. e-learning is well acclaimed for providing self-paced learning to students who are able to decide where, when and what to learn. In this study, 73% of students (93 out of 123) polled agreed that e-learning programs are helpful for them in learning English, but only less than 1% of students are frequent users (defined as using the programs more than 20 times a month). In the unsupervised e-learning environment, student's autonomy and motivation have greatest importance in the success of e-learning. If they fail to be their own teachers, learning effectiveness is expected to be low.

On the other hand, when e-learning has brought a revolutionary change in learning, at the same time, it also widens the learning gap between the rich and the poor given the fact that disparity of wealth and resources has made the rich richer and the poor poorer. To ensure its effectiveness, teachers should find out for themselves whether students have access to the minimal technology required for e-learning. If not, e-learning programs might not reach their goals.

Finally, even though e-learning has attracted a lot of attention in English teaching, this paper still argues that successful integration of ICT into teaching is dependent on the attitudes, understanding and actions of individual teachers towards using new technology. As Cornu indicates, "the human dimension of the teaching profession appears to be essential, and this dimension cannot be replaced by technology, but the human dimension can be supported and enhanced by technology, since ICT reinforces the possibilities of communication for the learner" (2003, p. 23).

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Table 1. Number of Students that Had Used English E-Learning Programs

E-Learning Programs	AMC E-Learning	E-Touch	Easy Test	APPC TOEIC	English/Japanese Self Taught.
Bought in	2010	2008	2007	2005	2004
Students Ever Used	19/123	104/123	45/123	20/123	0/123

Table 2. Frequency of Student's Use of English E-Learning Programs

Frequency	Morethan 30 times/month	20-30 times/month	10-20 times/month	3-10 times/month	Less than 3 times/month	Never
Students	0	1	3	42	66	11

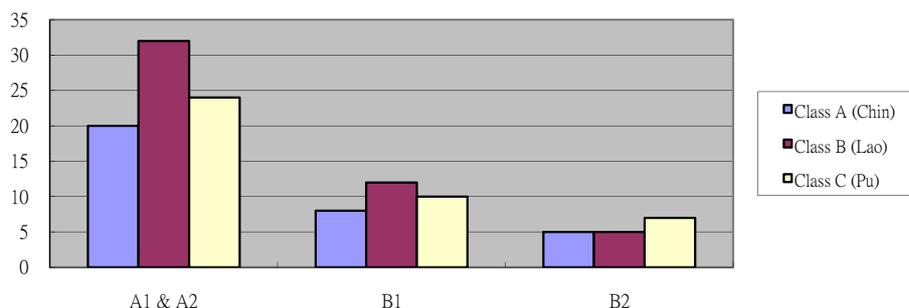


Figure 1. English Proficiency Level of the Three Classes

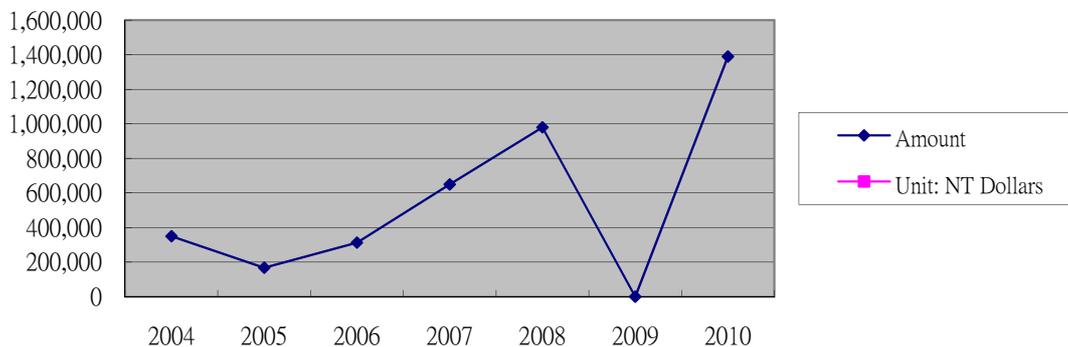


Figure 2. The University’s Budget for English E-Learning Programs (2004-10)

(Source: The Language Center of the University)

Appendix A: Student Questionnaires

Class: No: Name:

(1) Do you hold a language proficiency certificate?

- No
- A 1 or A2 (TOEIC 350+ GEPT Elementary)
- B1 (TOEIC 500+, GEPT Intermediate)
- B2 (TOEIC 575+, GEPT High Intermediate)
- C1 (TOEIC 880+ GEPT Advanced)
- C2 (TOEIC 950+ GEPT Superior)

(2) Which E-learning program of this university have you ever used?

- E-Touch
- Easy-Test
- APPC TOEIC
- AMC E-Learning
- None

(3) How often do you use the E-learning programs each week?

- More than 30 times/month
- 20-30 times/month
- 10-20 times/month
- 3-10 times/month
- Less than 3 times/month
- Never

(4) Do you think that E-learning programs help to improve your English proficiency?

- Yes
- No

Appendix B: Teacher Interview Questions

For all teachers:

- (1) Please talk about the grade(s) you are currently teaching.
- (2) Do you use any E-learning programs of this university as your teaching or supplementary materials?
- (3) Do you ask your students to do on-line exercises in those E-learning programs?
- (4) Do you think the university has invested enough money on E-learning programs?
- (5) In which way do you think that E-learning programs do benefit your students most?
- (6) In your personal view, how to encourage students to use e-learning programs of this university?

For teachers having administrative duties only:

- (7) Why does this university procure so many English e-learning programs in a short span of six years?
- (8) What is the major concern of the university's procurement policy over English e-learning programs?