Japanese University Students' Evaluations of Teacher-Guided E-Learning

Masakazu Mishima

Abstract: This study examined a total of 76 first year Japanese university students' perceptions of a type of blended learning—teacher guided e-learning. Data were collected by an online survey to probe into students' experience of the e-learning course offered at the research site in relation to motivation, skill improvement, test preparation, autonomous learning, and advantages and disadvantages of e-learning. The results show that a comparatively higher number of participants indicated the e-learning course was effective in sustaining their motivation, preparing them for English proficiency tests, and improving their listening skills. Some participants also indicated their willingness to continue to use the e-learning software for future self-study. While the study suggests the positive impact of e-learning on some select domains, many students showed mixed attitudes toward e-learning. The variability observed among students' evaluations warrants a further study to understand the reasons behind their evaluations.

Keywords: computer-assisted language learning, blended learning

Introduction

With the advancement of information technologies, the use of digital tools (e.g., web-applications, the internet, and language learning software systems) has now become a common practice in language teaching and learning. In tandem with the increasing use of digital tools in English language teaching, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) as a research area in applied linguistics has been gaining increasing popularity in the last two decades (Rahmawati, 2016). Within the area of research, one of the major topics of interest is students' perceptions of CALL (e.g., Ayres, 2002; Christie, 2001; Heller, 2005; Holmes, 1998; Hwu, 2003; Stepp-Greany, 2002). Although the studies in the topic above were conducted in various contexts, their findings collectively indicated that students had shown positive attitudes towards CALL (Wiebe & Kabata, 2010).

An overview of the previous studies in CALL reveals that the ways in which CALL has been adopted and implemented in language teaching show significant variability (Kohn, 2009). Correspondingly, this variability resulted in the emergence of various taxonomies defining the nature of CALL in terms of differing modes of its implementation such as learner-led e-learning, facilitated e-learning, instructor-led e-learning, embedded e-learning, telementored e-learning or e-coaching (Horton & Horton, 2003). More recently, the term—blended learning—has paved its way into the ever-more increasing

modes of e-learning (Tomilinson & Whittaker, 2013). However, the varying modes of CALL implementation in teaching English has been a major issue in assessing the impact of e-learning on English language learning (Coryell & Chlup, 2007).

In the context of university level English education in Japan, many universities across the nation have adopted commercially-developed e-learning software systems as a viable resource to help their students study English. For instance, ALC, a leading English language teaching material publisher in Japan, reported that their e-learning software system was adopted by more than 400 universities and colleges in 2011 (ALC PRESS INC, 2017).

Despite the increasing adoption of e-learning software systems in teaching English at Japanese universities, students' language learning experience with a commercially developed e-learning software system has been underresearched. Against this backdrop, the current research was conducted as an exploratory attempt to examine Japanese university students' evaluations of their e-learning experience with a commercially developed web-based English language learning software system.

Method

The setting

The current study was conducted at a private university in Japan where an e-learning course was offered to all freshman year students as part of the university-wide curriculum. The e-learning course is designed to develop students' English language skills (i.e., reading and listening) through a web-based English language learning software system. The course also aims to help students become autonomous learners through using the e-learning system to study English on their own. The e-learning system used in the course contains two different learning modules: standard module and TOEIC practice module. The former module consists of 50 reading practice and 50 listening practice units. Each unit has five different practice activities and it takes about 5-15 minutes to complete depending on the level of difficulty—each unit is classified into one of the five difficulty levels. The latter module offers a collection of mini-TOEIC practice tests. The course primarily uses the standard module and students are required to complete the entire module (i.e., a total of 100 units) by the end of the semester. The TOEIC practice module is used as a supplementary material and students are required to complete five mini-TOEIC based tests before the end of the semester.

Mode of e-learning

The course implements e-learning guided by an instructor. The primary role of the instructor is to provide instructions on how to use the e-learning software system, monitor students' progress, and troubleshoot if there is any technical issue. In addition, the instructor provides in-class assignments for each lesson period (i.e., designated units to be completed in class) and homework assignments (i.e., designated units to be completed outside of class).

Unlike other popular modes of e-learning (e.g., fully online e-learning—see, Smith & Kurthen, 2007; Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012) students in the course attend a 90 minute lesson once a week for 14 weeks and physically meet the instructor in a computer-lab. During each lesson period, students engage in e-learning in two phases. The first half of the class time is used for students to complete instructor-assigned units from the standard module. Then in the second half, students freely select unassigned units from the standard module to study by themselves until the end of each lesson period. In summation, learning in this course is fully conducted as self-study by using the e-learning software system, and the instructor acts as a guide/troubleshooter rather than a teacher who provides language instruction and/or activities as in traditional language learning classrooms.

The aforementioned mode of e-learning can be considered a form of blended learning although the term has been variously defined (see for example, Banados, 2006; Dudeney & Hockly, 2007; Singh & Reed, 2001). The definition of blended learning which closely matches the e-learning course in the present study is that of Neumeier (2005) and Stracke (2006) who defined blended learning as a combination of face to face classroom and self-paced learning with online materials. However, the definition still escapes the nature of the e-learning course at the research site since the course does not include any form of content delivery or language instruction from instructors as defined by Neumeier (2005) and Stracke (2006). Hence, the present research defines the mode of e-learning under examination as teacher-guided classroom e-learning as a type of blended learning where the role of instructors is strictly that of a guide, and student learning is carried out in a form of computer-mediated self-study.

Data collection
Data were collected from students enrolled in a section of the said e-learning course via an online survey form. The researcher sent an email with a link to the survey to all students and asked for voluntary participation at the end of the spring semester in 2017. The survey was conducted in participants' first language—Japanese, and it contained a total of eight questions: four Likert-scale, one multiple-choice, and three open-ended questions. The survey was designed to elicit participants' perceptions about their e-learning experience in relation to the following:
    a. Motivation
    b. English language skill improvement
    c. English language test preparation
    d. Willingness to use the e-learning software system for future self-study
    e. Advantages of e-learning
    f. Disadvantages of e-learning
Four five-point Likert-scale questions were provided in statement form for which participants were requested to choose one of the five options in response to each given statement: 1) strongly agree, 2) agree, 3) neither agree nor disagree, 4) disagree, and 5) strongly disagree. One question contained four different options (i.e., listening, reading, writing, and speaking). Only for this question, participants were allowed to choose more

than one option.

In addition to the above, one open-ended questions asked participants to report their TOEIC ITP score. At the research site, all freshman students are required to take the TOEIC ITP for placement purposes. All participants therefore had taken the test before they participated in the study. Finally, two open-ended questions asked participants to respectively comment on advantages and disadvantages of e-learning.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed via frequency analysis except for three open-ended questions. Then, the researcher developed bar charts to present the results. One of the three open-ended questions asked participants to report their TOEIC ITP score. Responses to the question were analyzed via descriptive statistics (e.g., mean and standard deviation). The remaining two open-ended questions asked participants to comment on advantages and disadvantages of e-learning. Participants' comments were analyzed by using the open-coding method to generate thematic categories to classify their responses.

Participants

A total of 76 students participated in the study. Table 1 shows participants' English language proficiency as measured by the TOEIC ITP. Be noted that the total number of respondents is 67 since nine participants reported that they did not remember their test score. Therefore, these participants are not included in the table. As can be seen, the average score of participants is approximately 439. In order to profile participants in terms of their English language proficiency, the researcher used the TOEIC-CEFR (i.e., The Common European Framework of Reference) conversion table (ETS, 2016), since the TOEIC is an English proficiency test for business context. As the result, most participants were found to be at low-intermediate level—between A2 (Elementary) and B1 (Intermediate) levels in the CEFR. The distribution of the test scores is positively skewed indicating there were some participants who scored much higher than the average score. The minimum and maximum scores indicate a large gap between the lowest and highest scores reported. Based on the observations above, participants in the current study were mostly at low-intermediate level while select participants were either at elementary or intermediate level in their English language proficiency.

Table 1

TOEIC ITP test scores

Instrument	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD/Skewness
TOEIC ITP	67	300.00	600.00	438.6	38.0/+1.01

# Results and Discussion

E-learning and motivation

Figure 1 shows participants' responses to the statement: *E-learning is effective in sustaining motivation for English language learning*. More than 50% of participants responded that e-learning was effective in sustaining their motivation. By contrast, less than 4% of participants indicated disagreement with the statement. Slightly over 40% of participants did not indicate a clear position (i.e., agree or disagree). These results suggest that e-learning can be effective in sustaining students' motivation. However, a further study is needed to identify what elements of e-learning may be related to the differing evaluations of students in terms of the effectiveness of e-learning in sustaining their motivation. In particular, it is imperative to understand reasons why some participants selected the neither agree nor disagree option.
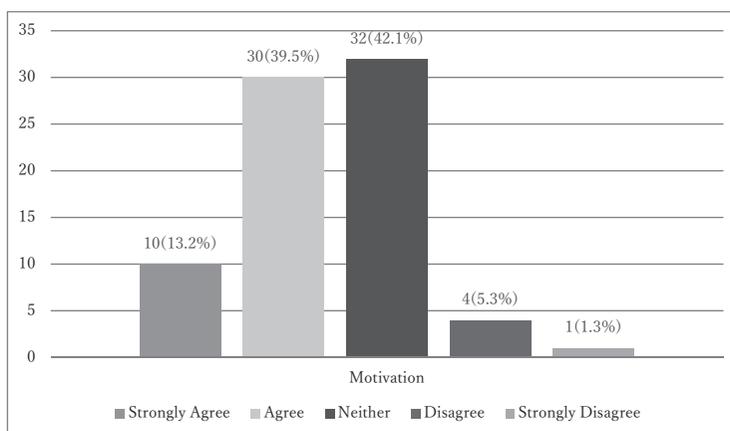
*Figure 1*. Perceived effectiveness of e-learning in sustaining motivation

English language skills improvement

Figure 2 shows participants' responses to the statement: *e-learning is effective in improving my overall English language proficiency*. Approximately 70% of participants indicated agreement with the statement suggesting the positive impact of e-learning on their overall English language proficiency. The e-learning course required participants to complete all 100 units in listening and reading. This is an intensive workload and possibly contributed to their perceived improvement in their overall English language proficiency.
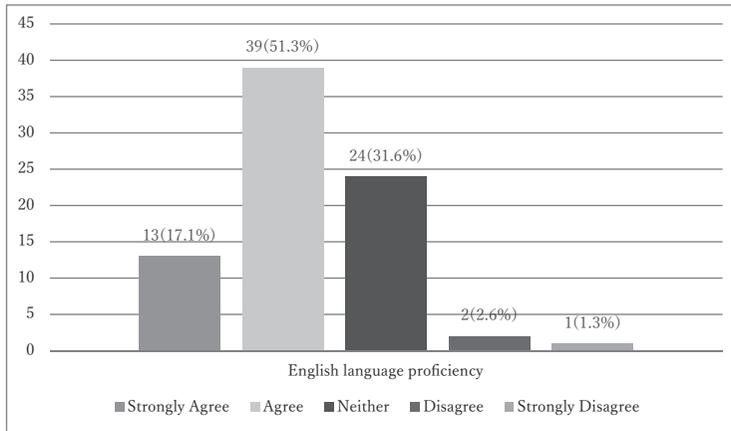
Figure 2. Perceived improvement in overall English language proficiency

Figure 3 presents a summary of participants' perceived improvement in four major English language skills. The vast majority of participants (96.0%) reported the improvement of their listening skill and attributed it to their e-learning experience. This result is well-warranted by the fact that the e-learning software system used in the course contained a substantial amount of listening exercises. In addition, approximately one third of participants reported the improvement of their reading skill. Compared to the listening skill, the impact of e-learning upon participants' reading skill seems limited even though the software system provided many reading exercises. As for writing and speaking skills, almost no participants reported their improvement. This is expected as the e-learning system had neither speaking nor writing components.
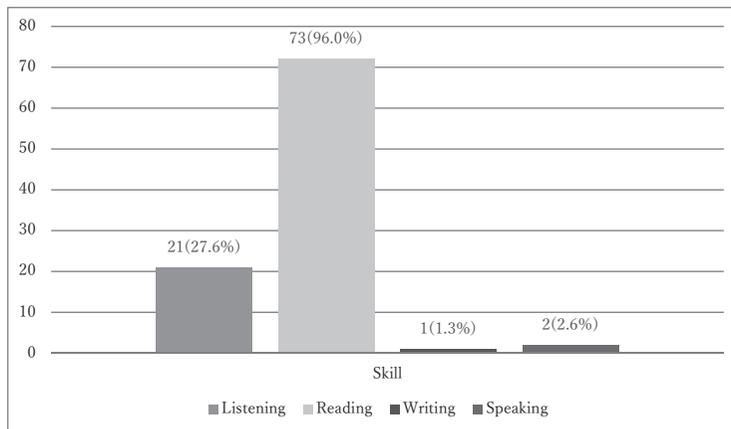

Figure 3. Perceived improvement in English language skills

E-learning and test preparation

Figure 4 presents a summary of participants' responses to the statement: *e-learning is effective in preparing for English language proficiency tests*. A little over 60% of participants agreed with the statement suggesting the possible benefit of e-learning for test

preparation purposes. Approximately 25% of participants were in the neither category, and slightly over 14% of participants disagreed with the statement. Since the statement did not specify which English proficiency test is in question (e.g., TOEIC or TOEFL), participants may have thought of different English tests when responding to the statement. However, tasks in the e-learning system resembled the task types used in the TOEIC. Therefore, it is possible that participants thought of the TOEIC rather than other tests, which resulted in a comparatively larger number of participants showing the agreement with the statement.
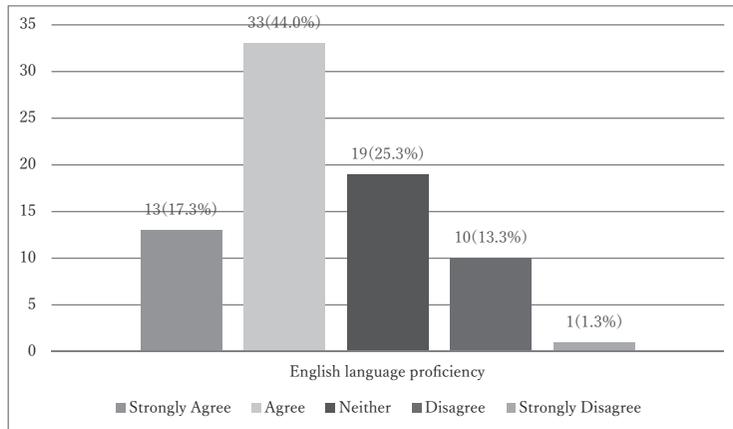
Figure 4. Perceived effectiveness of e-learning in preparing for English language proficiency tests

E-learning and autonomous learning

As presented earlier, one of the major goals of the e-learning course was to help students become autonomous learners who continue studying English on their own. At the research site, the e-learning system used in the course remains accessible even after students complete the course. Figure 5 shows participants' responses to the statement: *I intend to continue using the e-learning system for self-study*. 46% of participants indicated their willingness to continue using the system. This result is somewhat unexpected as participants completed all available units in the system during the semester, and yet roughly half of participants intend to use the system for their future studies.
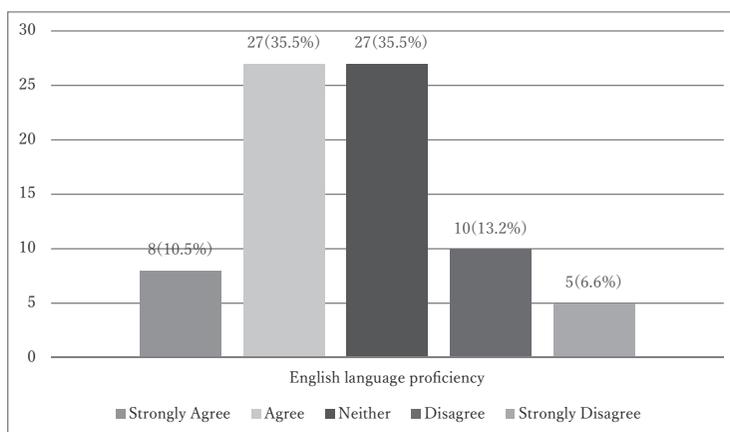
Figure 5. Willingness to continue using the e-learning system for self-study

Advantages of e-learning

Participants' comments on the advantages of e-learning were analyzed via open-coding. Coded data were further reviewed to identify common themes. As the result, four major themes emerged: 1. accessibility, 2. content, 3. functionality, and 4. course structure.

Accessibility. Many participants reported accessibility as a major advantage of e-learning. Participants, for instance, noted that to be able to study English virtually anywhere is "bliss" as long as a computer and internet connection are available. Related to the accessibility, some participants also noted the high level of accessibility increased their exposure to English.

Content. Though not many, participants positively evaluated the content of e-learning for its diverse topics, difficulty levels, and/or tasks. In particular, the participants collectively noted that topic and task variations fueled into their motivation.

Functionality. The strengths of e-learning noted under this theme were related to the software functions. One of them is the review function which provides users with easy access to the tasks that they did not do well and review the key contents of the tasks (e.g., vocabulary). One other function that participants noted as strength was the control function available for listening practice units. The function allows the user to control the speed of audio playback to help practice listening at different speech rates.

Course structure. Several participants reported that the course structure was conducive to their learning. They positively responded to the fact that the course allowed them to select units they wished to work on and to study selected units at their own pace. In addition, although there were a few select cases, participants highly valued the repeated use of computer, which helped them improve their digital literacy skills (e.g., typing).

Disadvantages of e-learning

Participants' comments on the disadvantages of e-learning showed much less variability; their comments were related to the following three themes: 1. eyestrain, 2. equipment readiness, and 3. lack of writing and/or speaking tasks.

Eyestrain. Many participants complained that e-learning put too much strain on their eyes. While the course allowed students to take a few minutes of break during a lesson period, it did not seem to remedy the problem inherent in computer-mediated learning.

Equipment readiness. Although participants highly valued the accessibility to online learning materials, they also pointed out the cumbersomeness to ready the essential tools (i.e., Windows-ready PC and Internet connection) to ensure that accessibility. Due to the software system's incompatibility with non-Windows based devices (i.e., android, iOS based devises, and Mac), participants seemed to have found it difficult to fully appreciate the strength of e-learning. Although the number is small, some participants reported that they did not have a Windows-PC and/or internet connection at home. Therefore, they all had to do homework assignments at school, which they noted as "a drag."

Lack of writing and/or speaking tasks. As mentioned earlier, the e-learning system used in the course contained only reading and listening exercises. Although the university offers a wide variety of courses which focus more on productive than receptive skills, some participants raised concerns about the lack of writing and/or speaking tasks in the e-learning course.

Conclusion

The present study examined Japanese university students' evaluations of the e-learning course provided in a form of blended learning. Overall findings point to positive effects of e-learning in sustaining students' motivation, preparing them for English proficiency tests, and improving their listening and/or reading skills. The study also shows a number of advantages and disadvantages associated with e-learning. Given the design of the study, however, the study is largely inconclusive. In particular, while a comparatively higher number of students positively evaluated their e-learning experience on a variety of grounds, many showed a mixed attitude toward e-learning. Since the study is unable to explain reasons behind their evaluative decisions whether it is positive, negative, or neither, future studies should be geared toward exploring factors associated with variability in students' evaluations in order to identify potential areas of improvement in the e-learning course.

References

ALC PRESS INC. (2017). E-ラーニング: 導入実績. Retrieved from
　　　http://www.alc-education.co.jp/academic/net/actual/index.html
Ayres, R. (2002). Learner attitudes towards the use of CALL. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *15*, 241-249.
Banados, E. (2006). A blended-learning pedagogical model for teaching and learning EFL successfully through an online interactive multimedia environment. *CALICO*

Journal, 23, 533-550.

Coryell, E. J., & Chlup, T. D. (2007). Implementing E-learning components with adult English language learners: Vital factors and lessons learned. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 20*, 264-278.

Christie, K. N. (2001). Web-based multimedia in business Italian. A longitudinal evaluation of learner experiences and attitudes. *Italica, 78*, 499-525.

Dudeney, G., & Hockly, N. (2007). *How to teach English with technology*. New York: Pearson Education.

ETS. (2016). Mapping the TOEIC and TOEIC bridge tests on the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR). Retrieved from https://www.ets.org/toeic/research/mapping_toeic

Gruba, P., & Hinkelman, J. (2012). *Blended technologies in second language classrooms*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Heller, I. (2005). Learner experiences and CALL-tool usability: Evaluating the Chemnitz Internet Grammar 1. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 18*, 119-142.

Holmes, B. (1998). Initial perceptions of CALL by Japanese university students. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 11, 397-409.

Horton, W., & Horton, K. (2003). *E-Learning tools and technologies*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Hwu, F. (2003). Learners' behaviors in computer-based input activities elicited through tacking technologies. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 16*, 5-29.

Kohn, K. (2009). Computer assisted foreign language learning. In K. Karlfried, & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.).

Handbook of foreign language communication and learning (pp. 573-603). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Neumeier, P. (2005). A closer look at blended learning—parameters for designing a blended learning environment for language teaching and learning. *ReCALL, 17*, 163-178.

Rahmawati, F. (2016). E-learning implementation: Its opportunities and drawbacks perceived by EFL students. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching & Learning, 1*, 1-15.

Singh, H., & Reed, C. (2001). A white paper: Achieving success with blended learning. Retrieved from www.p2partners.co.uk

Smith, G. G., & Kurthen, H. (2007). Front-stage and back-stage in hybrid e-learning face to face courses. *International JL on E-learning, 6*, 455-474.

Stepp-Greany, J. (2002). Student perceptions on language learning in a technological environment: Implications for the new millennium. *Language Learning & Technology, 6*, 165-180.

Stracke, E. (2006). An e-recipe for success. *EL Gazette, 312*, December 5.

Tomilinson, B., & Whittaker, C. (Eds.). *Blended learning in English language teaching: Course design and implementation*. London: British Council.

Wiebe, G., & Kabata, K. Students' and instructors' attitudes toward the use of CALL in foreign language teaching and learning. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 23*, 221-234.