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Language Teaching and Settlement for Newcomers in the Digital Age: A Blended Learning Research Project



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Abstract

Blended Learning (BL) in English language learning programs in Canada is defined as the combination of f2f learning with instructor-facilitated use by students of online activities and resources that complement the in-class teaching (Kennell & Moriarty, 2014). Blended Learning is increasingly in demand by students, teachers, and programs (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), particularly in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, the English language and settlement program provided by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) in Canada (Kennell & Moriarty, 2014). This article explains the findings of a demonstration research project regarding the effects of blended learning in LINC for students, instructors, and the program. The blended approach shows promise for enhancing English language learning and access to LINC classes for newcomers to Canada via technologies important in our digital age. The research findings here regarding the effects of BL in LINC are important in light of the need to enhance accessibility to English language learning for newcomers to Canada and the paucity of research related to BL for English language learning and settlement needs (Kennell & Moriarty, 2014; Lawrence, 2014).

Keywords: blended learning effects, English, newcomers, self-efficacy for technology use and English language learning

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within this paper.

Introduction

As a student and an immigrant, I have been in the blended class for almost one year, so I have enriched numerous essential skills not only in English but also Canadian culture. Honestly, I strongly love this program, and it is a great innovation in the ESL field. (Student Participant, Blended Learning Research Project)

I am a total convert [to blended learning/teaching]! (Teacher Participant, Blended Learning Research Project)

The quotes above represent the extensive support for use of the Blended Learning approach for learning English for newcomers in Canada found during a recent research project, “Researching the Effects of Blended Learning in LINC: A Demonstration Research Project.” The research examined the effects of Blended Learning (BL) in settlement language learning LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) programs in Canada. This project was funded by Immigration, Refugees, Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and was conducted by the researchers as independent researchers during September 2017 – June 2018. We report the findings of the research here and discuss important implications for implementing BL in settlement English language learning.

BL is increasingly in demand by students, teachers, and programs (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) in English as a Second Language (ESL) and the LINC programs, the English language and settlement program provided by IRCC in Canada (Kennell & Moriarty, 2014). BL in English language learning here is defined as the combination of face-to-face (f2f) learning with instructor-facilitated use by learners of online activities and resources that complement the in-class teaching (Kennell & Moriarty, 2014). BL enhances English language learning and access to LINC classes for newcomers to Canada via technologies important in our digital age. The research findings regarding the effects of BL in LINC are important in light of the need to enhance accessibility to English language learning for newcomers to Canada and the paucity of research related to BL for English language learning and settlement needs (Kennell & Moriarty, 2014; Lawrence, 2014).

Background

Needs

In 2016 – 2017, LINC and other IRCC-funded settlement language programs in Canada provided instruction to 109,006 newcomers, an increase of 4.2% over the previous year” (McBride, 2018, p.6). However, the SLNN Survey (Canada Settlement Language National Network, 2015; Sturm, McBride, & Edgar, 2018) revealed trends in declining enrolment in ESL classes and a need to better address vulnerable, multi-barriered populations. The 2017 IRCC Evaluation of the Settlement Program recommended that providers “consider new and innovative approaches to language training for adult immigrants” (pp. 56–57). The LINC program has a positive impact on English language learning and newcomer settlement (Government of Canada, 2010), but there are long waiting lists and a need for flexible programming options such as those made possible through BL. McBride (2018, p. 6) noted: “Still, waiting lists persist, and many prospective learners may simply get discouraged and make do without LINC, and an unknown number may simply not seek language training at all in favour of immediate employment.”

Kennell and Moriarty (2014) noted that findings related to BL are positive; however, much of this research “doesn’t look directly at adult settlement blended language learning” (p. 2). They recommended BL to reduce the social isolation newcomers experience and “to enable newcomers to become comfortable with the kinds of technology they will be facing at work, in Canadian society, and

in other facets of education.” (Kennel & Moriarty, 2014, p. 5). Lawrence (2014), in a study of technology use in ESL in Ontario, Canada, also noted that a BL approach was favoured by most stakeholders.

The LINC Program Impact Evaluation Report (Sturm *et al.*, 2018) recommended BL implementation to improve LINC delivery and access: “...the local development of a vision of BL for language instruction and the demonstration of leadership and active support by administrators to implement that vision are essential drivers for learning technology integration at LINC programs” (Sturm *et al.*, 2018, p. 22). “One hope for the better integration of learning technology is improved language training accessibility as it enables flexible program options such as blended or online distance classes that may better match the time constraints of newcomers struggling with entry-level employment, family obligations or illness.” (Sturm *et al.*, 2018, p. 4).

The research reported here demonstrates how one such model of BL was effectively implemented through the support of teachers, the administrator, and students to meet needs and to enhance English language and technology learning. The use of technologies added in ways that are meaningful to students’ lives inside and outside the classroom is gaining momentum. BL is increasingly supported for settlement English language learning as demonstrated by the BL LINC program, students, and teachers reported here.

Theoretical Background: Developing Effective Communities of Inquiry (COI)

Garrison and Vaughan (2008) brought the potential of BL to the forefront – albeit, mainly in relation to higher education. They explained the value of blending face-to-face (f2f) with online learning/teaching to improve communities of inquiry that engage learners in meaningful active learning and critical thinking. The COI framework is the predominant model that informs BL delivery today – for example, the BL LINC program reported here. The COI framework (Garrison, Archer, & Anderson, 2000) supports the Deweyan concept of communities of inquiry as educational communities that purposefully connect learners and teachers to collaboratively and critically investigate learning problems (rather than memorize solutions).

The COI framework (Garrison, Archer, & Anderson, 2000; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) explains how three presences may be strategically implemented to improve BL – social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. *Social presence* relates to developing a learning community in which participants develop purposeful, inter-personal relationships by projecting their individual personalities. (Garrison, 2009). *Teaching presence* involves instructor design and consistent and frequent engagement in the online learning with participants so that they are motivated to engage and achieve (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). *Cognitive presence* is the extent to which learners co-construct knowledge and meaning through the activities and discourse (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001).

Research Context and Methodology

The research project reported here was conducted in a blended LINC program at a major school board in British Columbia, Canada to examine the effects of BL in an authentic context, and to extrapolate best practices and conditions for BL. Although we visited, observed, and considered other BL LINC programs and classes before choosing this particular one, we chose this site because we wanted to study one where the teachers had experience in blended learning and conditions were established in order to demonstrate a model of blended learning that potentially could be adapted and implemented in similar LINC programs across Canada.

Forty-five students, three teachers, and one administrator at the same BL LINC program participated. Pseudonyms were used for all participants. Students, who were between the ages of 26 and 65, were from a variety of first language backgrounds. All had completed high school in their country of origin; most had completed university; several had completed graduate school. Most had worked professionally prior to arriving in Canada. This group of participants was representative of similar LINC classes at this intermediate level of LINC 6 – 7/8. We provide this background to ensure that the context and type of educational background of the students is understood, so that conditions and practices may be seen accordingly. During the research, 22 participants were not working outside the home in Canada; however, the others had jobs in construction, cleaning, serving and cooking, reception, and cashier work. They aimed to overcome “the settlement gap” that many immigrants in Canada face (McBride, 2018) – that is, jobs that do not match their actual education and expertise.

The three LINC classes included two full-time intermediate classes (LINC Level 6 and 7/8) with 16.5 f2f hours and at least 5.5 hours online learning each week; and, one part-time class (Level 7/8) with 5.5 hours f2f and at least 5.5 hours online each week. All three classes included both f2f and online learning and instruction each week. Multiple research tools and data were implemented to provide multiple perspectives on the effects of BL - student, teacher, and administrator questionnaires; a CELPIP test; a technology use self-efficacy questionnaire; classroom and online observations; student and teacher interviews; student-led focus group discussions, and student tasks and artifacts.

Students participated in the CELPIP test (Canadian English Language Proficiency Index Program) at the beginning of the research to establish a baseline description of students’ English language proficiency. This was found to be congruent with the intermediate LINC level classes in which they had been placed. Students were then asked to complete a background questionnaire about their language and technology learning with the support of the teachers. The administrator, teachers, and a resource teacher also completed a background questionnaire and were interviewed.

Students and teachers participated individually in interviews about their experiences with BL (30-45 minutes) and the effects and challenges of BL with one of the researchers near the beginning of the study. Classroom observations were then done in each class to describe the BL approach and activities. The online activities of students and teachers were also observed. Students completed a 10-point Likert scale self-efficacy questionnaire as an activity during class time near the mid-point of the research to describe their knowledge and confidence for using technology. Near the end of the research activities, students participated in focus group discussions about the benefits and challenges of BL based on questions about the effects and challenges of BL that they were given. Additionally, teachers shared impact statements by students about their BL LINC classes that were submitted to the provincial Literacy Innovation Award competition.

This project was implemented according to a demonstration research approach to examine the effects of the BL approach in an authentic and exemplary practice context. As explained above, the established and exemplary nature of the BL program studied here was considered in advance to document a BL program model that potentially could be adapted for similar LINC and ESL programs in the future. Demonstration research projects (Ware & Johnson, 2000) are often used as an applied research approach to closely examine applications of innovations as they unfold in “real time.” The purpose of a demonstration project is to see real applications of innovations in progress in order to extrapolate best practices and possible extensions of these innovations (in this case, BL) to additional contexts.

Research Questions

Three research questions were investigated:

1. What were the effects of the BL approach for the students' English language learning and for their participation in LINC?
2. What were the effects of the BL approach for learners' self-efficacy and knowledge for using technology for language learning?
3. a) What were the effects of the BL approach for LINC teachers, instruction, and the program;
b) What effective or "best" practices for BL were demonstrated in this context?

Data were analyzed using methods of constant comparison. The researchers conferred and reached inter-rater agreement to confirm the major themes related to the research questions, identifying the major themes across the multiple data sets. Each interpretation was compared with previous findings. As themes emerged from the background questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, they were discussed among the researchers who confirmed their interpretations based on the observed BL classes and activities.

Representative quotes based on the major themes identified are included here to illustrate the findings related to the effects of BL. The field notes from the observation sessions of the classes and the students' online activities provided insights into the teaching and learning practices and added rich description to the identified themes. The self-efficacy questionnaires shed further light on the perceptions of students about their abilities for using technologies for their learning and identified areas of confidence and anxiety.

Questions to elicit students' understanding of their self-efficacy for using technology were also included in the focus group discussions, as well as the roles of their teachers and their peers in their BL LINC classroom experiences. Students assumed the role of researchers by recording their focus groups' experiences, and one class prepared explanations of their findings as PowerPoint presentations. These student PowerPoints are included here in the figures and are representative artifacts from the research which illustrate the findings from the students' perspectives.

Context and Teaching Approach

An established program with teacher expertise in BL was chosen as the research site. Students had access to free wifi in classes with a Bring-Your-Own-Device (BYOD) policy; as well as use of iPads and laptops provided by the program. Many students used their cell phones or tablets to access online resources. Transition to BL courses to orient new students to the use of technology and EduLINC, the online software and activities used in BL LINC programs in Canada, had been implemented in this program to facilitate bridging to BL classes, so that most students were familiar with the online EduLINC activities used in the BL portion of the program.

Three teachers and one resource teacher participated. Support in the use of Moodle and the LINC courseware was available to teachers from LearnIT2teach mentors and live chat. Teachers strived to develop a strong sense of online community, teaching and social presence, and learner engagement; also, to implement activities relevant to students' lives; and, to co-ordinate f2f and online learning with an emphasis on the portfolio-based assessment activities (PBLA) required in LINC to demonstrate student achievement.

The teachers held bachelor's degrees in teaching and TESL certificates. Each had completed at least a

minimum of Stage 2 of the training for using EduLINC, the BL software and activities used in LINC programs in Canada. Two teachers were working towards completion of the most advanced level, Stage 4. They underlined that using EduLINC was an important factor in their blended work, and that using the same LMS facilitated collaboration, training, and tech support. Each teacher had also trained in the PBLA, the mandated assessment process in LINC. It is worth noting that while BL training is not mandatory, all LINC teachers are required to train in PBLA. Thus teacher PBLA training may take precedent over teacher training in BL; however, the research data in this project showed a high degree of interaction between BL and implementation of PBLA as the three main teachers emphasized the importance of the constant integration and co-ordination of PBLA activities in-class and online.

The success of the blended approach in this program was made possible by the teachers' commitment to BL, their expert collaboration on BL activities and the curriculum, and the program administrator's support. Teachers observed that students were "more connected to the community at large, had more chances to practice language in context, developed their confidence, and shaped their new identity; also, that students' progress and motivation increased..." because of BL (Andrada, Teacher Interview).

Results and Discussion

Effects of blended learning

We first summarize the findings related to the effects of blended learning for students and teachers here to provide an overview; then explain these in more detail theme by theme with representative examples and quotes.

The effects of BL explained by the students, instructors, and other participants were:

- high levels of engagement and participation in LINC BL classes; improved student attendance; and high satisfaction with the BL LINC program
- increased use of English by learners and more ease in using English in pursuing settlement goals; improved English language skills and confidence in listening/speaking, reading, and writing
- enhanced access to technology and increased use of technology for learning English
- improved opportunities for interaction by students and decreased sense of isolation: social and learning connections with community and school.

These benefits are reflected in Figure 1 below developed by students during the focus group discussions.

Learner participation, access, and interactions

There were both blended and non-blended classes offered in the LINC program studied. Compared to the non-blended classes in the same program, the administrator and teachers explained that participation in BL exceeded that of non-blended classes. They attributed this improved access to LINC classes to BL - students indicated that they had chosen the BL classes because they allowed them to work part time outside the home or work at home with family while studying English. The administrator noted that monthly attendance showed that BL classes had higher attendance than other classes – "in one BL class with EduLINC, average attendance is 95 % plus; 89 % across all [blended classes]." (Gladys, Program Administrator Interview).

The teachers explained these effects:

Attendance is really good... Students seem to look forward to sharing what they've done online and learn more in class... (Andrada, Teacher Interview)

[BL] increases access for students who would normally drop out after LINC 4 when they have what they need [she was referring to LINC 4 as the level required for citizenship and residency in Canada]. This way they have a way to feasibly continue and keep learning; often also to support their children's learning. (Eleanor, Teacher Interview and Questionnaire)

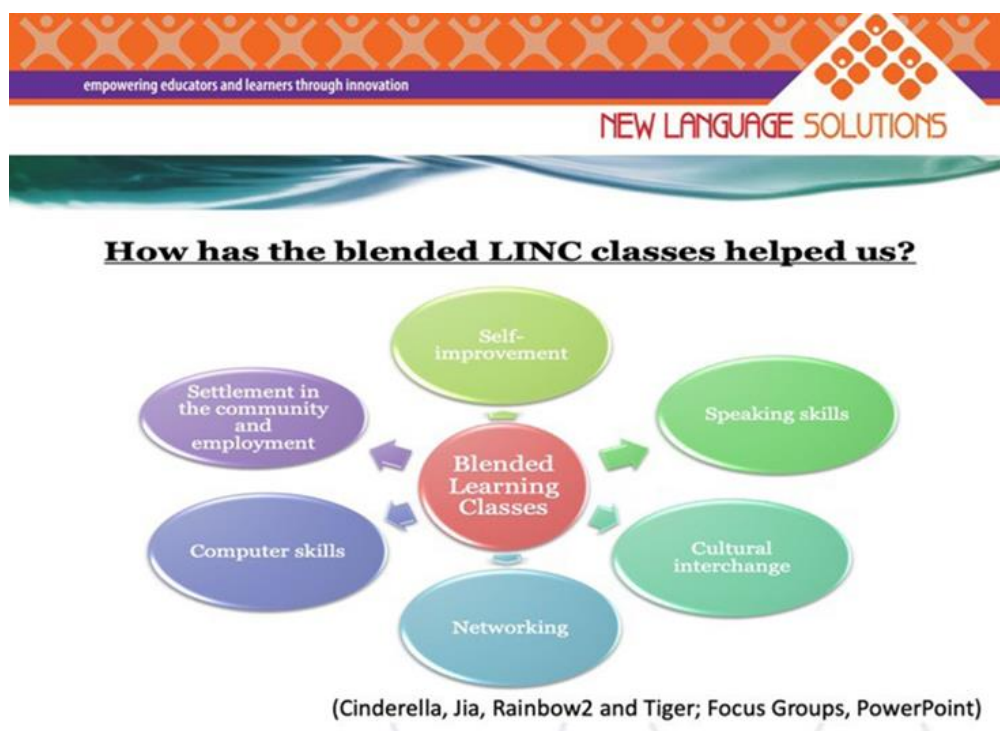



Figure 1 Reported benefits of LINC classes from student focus group discussion (from Sturm, Cummings, & Avram, November, 2018).

Student participants similarly explained how BL allowed them to participate in English language classes that they would otherwise miss due to work and home responsibilities. Aleesa explained that she was so pleased with the BL program that she had already recommended BL LINC classes to her Facebook group – 2,000 Russian speaking mothers living in the lower mainland area of British Columbia. (Aleesa, Student Interview). Alin and most students highlighted that the flexible access to learning English enabled by BL was highly beneficial: “It’s great for someone with a job and busy schedule.” (Alin, Student Interview). Similarly, Donya explained: “...because I have to look after my family, I can’t be a full-time student in school all week long. I use a few days learning in the class, talking with my classmates to practise my oral language and listening...to participate in this program makes me feel free in study. I maintain added value to myself and [it] makes me more confident.” (Donya, PBLA artefact). Students benefited from both online and face-to-face teaching and learning each week.

Ana (Student Interview), like Donya and many others, appreciated the interactions and connections that BL created: “...online offers lots of opportunities for interaction. The flexibility is great... you choose when you want or have time to do the work.”

Students and teachers emphasized that the integration of classroom with online activities increased time on task and completion of the learning process – students could frequently interact, practise, and prepare for class. Students explained how the online and f2f classroom activities were thus mutually beneficial. Figure 2 below from the student focus group discussions represents these benefits:

empowering educators and learners through innovation



Online Activities


How was the online component beneficial to the face-to-face class?

NEW LANGUAGE SOLUTIONS

Online Activities

How was the online component beneficial to the face-to-face class?

- Pushes you to organize your time to complete all the activities on time.
- Freedom/flexibility (time and place).
- We keep learning every day. Whenever we have free time, we can access our account in EduLine and learn.
- Online Activities give us more resources and topics to explore.
- We can review the topics that we've learned in class.



(Batgirl, Arli, Sailor Moon, Kelly; Focus groups)

Figure 2 *Reported benefits of online activities from student focus group discussions (from Cummings, Sturm, & Avram, November, 2018)*

Preparation for further studies/work, intergenerational effects, and skills learning

In response to interview questions about what they would tell a friend/new student about the BL classes, students consistently expressed their satisfaction and wanted to continue in the BL program. Students explained: “In a blended class you prepare to study for post-secondary; it also prepares you for the workplace; and supports independent learning. ... It helps me improve my life and build my future.” (Aleesa, Student Interview)

Preparation for independent learning and postsecondary studies were particularly important for this group, most of whom had previously worked in fields that required a high level of post-secondary education but were now “underemployed” in Canada and seeking ways to re-enter their previous fields.

Students also highlighted the intergenerational educational benefits of BL, explaining that they knew how to help their children with their schooling because of BL. Hala (Student Interview) noted: “The platform used by my daughter at school is similar to the one in LINC (EduLINC)...the combination is good: to learn English and how to use technology at the same time.”

Students valued the online component provided through EduLINC and related teacher-developed activities. They emphasized how integrated applications within EduLINC such as POODLL, an interactive teaching tool that facilitates video and audio presentations and feedback in an online course,

plus links to online resources such as Quizlet and Typing.com, helped them to prepare for each f2f class and develop additional skills. They were able to increase their participation in and preparation for activities, to review new materials and vocabulary and, to listen to and practice pronunciation before and after their f2f classes. Figure 3 below shows how one focus group summed up these benefits.

Self-efficacy for technology use

BL was highly positive for students, individualizing access to technology and customizing learning to individual needs, interests, and schedules. At the midway point in the study, students evaluated their abilities for using technologies for English language learning and various tasks towards achieving their settlement goals, such as applying for jobs online. Students completed the student self-efficacy

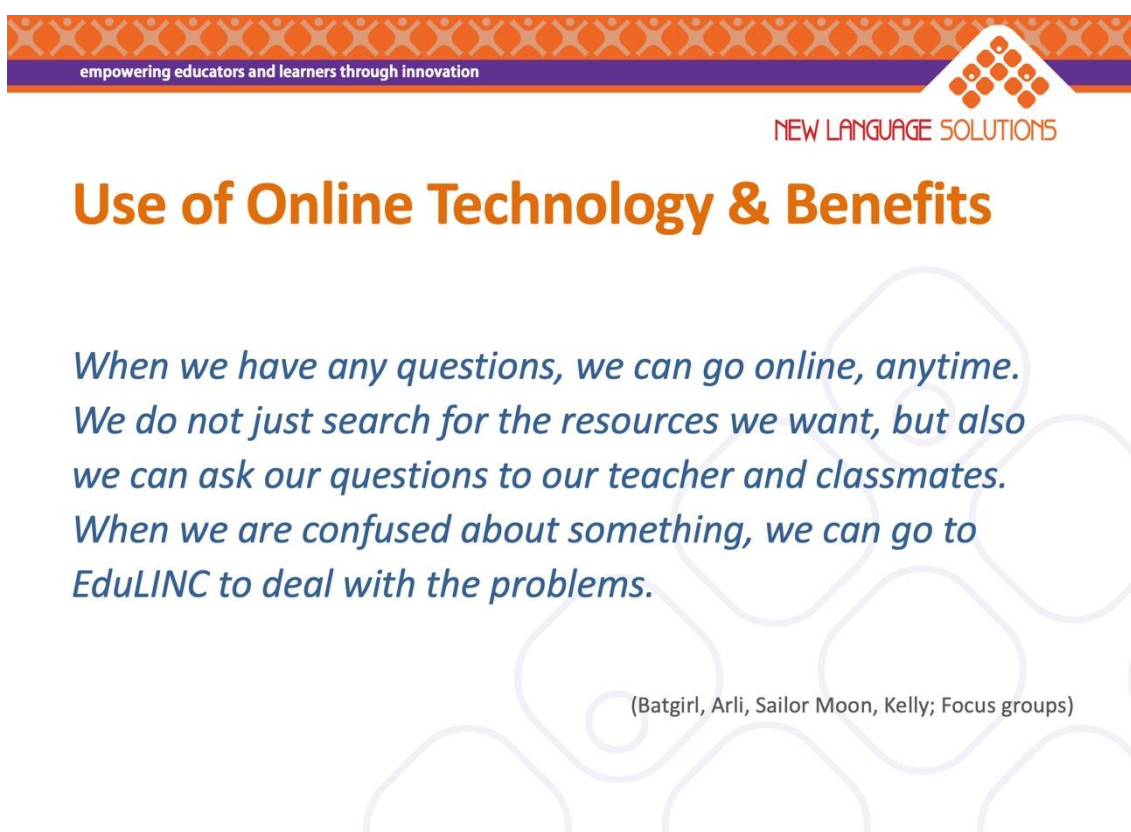


Figure 3 *Reported benefits of use of online technology from student focus group discussions (from Cummings, Sturm, & Avram, November, 2018)*

questionnaire based on a Likert scale where they rated their self-efficacy for using technology to establish a description of confidence for using technologies for specific tasks. They circled the number on the scale (0=Not at All Confident to 10=Very Confident) that best described their level of confidence for using a computer or laptop for finding information, and for writing, applying, and studying online. Likert scale points were grouped for analysis: Respondents with maximum confidence (10); greater rates of confidence (7-9); unsure (4-6); and respondents who expressed greater doubts (1-3). Table 1 below shows the levels of student self-efficacy for using technology reported. Students reported that they were familiar with using technologies; however, were also developing important skills for using technology for learning English and settlement through the BL program.

Most importantly, students noted that the array of technological communication resources, skills, and activities that they used in the BL classes increased their access to technology for learning English, which in turn helped them with settlement. They explained how they used computers for real life

communications in BL activities: "...buying and selling things; searching for community events/ medical services; education for my daughter; communications with my case manager; activities in chat rooms such as What's App, Facebook, Messenger, Viber; listening to the news or Ted Talks; reading different articles and press releases; communication about volunteer work, the Work B.C. program; communicate with service providers such as B.C. Hydro..." (Aleesa, Student Interview).

Table 1 *Reported benefits of familiarity with using technologies (from Cummings, Sturm, & Avram, November, 2018)*

Question	Measure of familiarity with technology	Score
1	I am able to use a computer or laptop to find an apartment, house, room, or other residence	8.95
2	I am able to use a computer or laptop to find information about a school, college, or university program	8.93
3	I am able to use a computer or laptop to write a letter	9.05
4	I am able to use a computer or laptop to apply for a job or school	8.40
5	I am able to use a computer or laptop to study English on my own	8.91
6	I am able to use a computer or laptop to write a short report	8.55
7	I am able to use a computer or laptop to find out information about my province, city, town, or community	9.30
8	I am able to use a computer or laptop to review my English lessons online or at home	9.32
9	I am able to use a computer or laptop to find out about the news	9.43

Students emphasized the opportunities for technological learning and independence that came with BL. Students indicated that learning to use technology via the BL classes improved their use of technology specifically for learning English. Jin (Student Interview) explained how it was faster to find out about grammar using EduLINC; also, she used a dictionary on the phone to look up words, and apps allowed her to type and record audio notes, greatly improving access to information.

SweetCoco2, like other students, admitted: "The first day of class, I was shocked. I realized I didn't really have the skills." However, she explained that she took it as a challenge to get the skills she needed for Canadian society and hoped it would help her get a job. She emphasized: "No more running away from the technology! ...being able to use technology is not a choice anymore." (SweetCoco2, Student Interview).

Students also appreciated the BYOD policy and practice supported by the BL program. Abraham explained that he relied heavily on his smartphone for learning English and about the community. He was able to read the *New York Times* and listened to music in English and used Google Maps. "I am hungry for information – after all the restrictions in the first country." (Abraham, Student Interview).

English language learning and use

Student self-efficacy has been shown to be closely related to English language learning and performance (Bandura, 1997; Cumming, Cummings, & Erdosy, 2006; Raoofi, Tan, & Chan, 2012). Self-efficacy affects and predicts performance (Bandura, 1997; Cave, Evan, Dewey, & Harlstorn, 2018). Students highlighted their growing self-efficacy for using English and they described in detail how the combination of f2f classes and online engagement contributed to this. Students saw f2f classes and online learning as complementary in achieving their English language learning and settlement goals. They described and illustrated their improvement in English language skills during the focus group activities as in Figure 4 below.

Students noted the effects of f2f and online learning that benefited their language and additional skills learning. These quotes from the focus group discussions represent how these students explained these benefits and interactions afforded by BL:

To tell the truth, the blended learning program is quite new for me. Since I never took any online classes. In-person classes provide us the opportunity to talk to others as well as help us improve writing skills and reading strategies. While on-line classes provide us more classes to do the practice. I like blended learning since I work daytime, on-line classes allow me to finish the assignment also take care of my family. We have different topics each month which are helpful for newcomers to get to know Canada as well as to improve our English skills.



Figure 4 Reported improvement in English language skills from student focus group discussions (from Cummings, Sturm, & Avram, November, 2018)

Student focus groups explained how online EduLINC activities outside of class helped them with their classroom activities:

We feel like online class and taking class at school is connected. We would prepare for the class at school because of the online class. Some programs (example: Quizlet, typing.com, ...) can use only online. It helps learning... We can check and review online. We could learn more details by ourselves.

As for the project presentation about "Discover Canada," we learned to work with our classmates by using the EduLINC wiki, chatting on-line, sharing ideas, summarizing the topic, answering the questions. [We used] Quizlet to set up collocations, practice the collocations with the class. It is good for us to practice in

class on speaking. It is a good resource for us to prepare for the CELPIP.

They pointed out how online engagement was particularly useful for improving reading/writing skills and using websites to find information; how the EduLINC discussion forums were effective for sharing with their peers; and, how the online environment was beneficial for practising to better understand the main points of newscasts and TV—they were able to replay recordings they didn't fully understand. Students noted that they were able to improve their pronunciation and speaking skills in the same way.

Online interactions with peers were particularly valued. The forums and messaging features in EduLINC proved valuable to many students as they encouraged each other and exchanged information related to the class and their settlement needs.

Benefits of face-to-face class time

The in-class activities were highly important to students as well. The f2f classes were especially useful for speaking and listening practice. They valued the engagement with a teacher who modelled good pronunciation and body language, and explained that the in-class activities, field trips, and guest speakers made a big difference. Students saw their teachers as important sources of knowledge. They valued interactions with teachers and peers for understanding accents, obtaining feedback on learning activities, building a network and exchanging information about settlement experiences, and for encouragement.

Students saw engaging with one another and doing small talk and presentations in the classroom as helping them to be more confident when speaking in public. The focus groups explained how their English had improved:

We feel more confident about communicating in English at school, in the community, at our stores. Our English has improved since we began these classes.

After starting this class, I can understand about 95% of the official topics, such as education, health, news, work, community services. And I can express myself very clearly, for example, when I talk to my manager, my doctor, they can understand me easily.

Students expressed high satisfaction with their achievements in English language learning via BL. BL was facilitating their settlement goals while improving their English and knowledge of technology for learning. Their improved access to and attendance in LINC, and growing confidence for using technology and ease in using English were emphasized as important benefits.

Teacher perspectives

The effects of BL for the teachers, instruction, and the program were noteworthy – particularly related to student access and participation, implementation of LINC activities according to student needs, interests, and goals, and support of the curriculum and PBLA.

Teachers highlighted these effects of BL:

- Students work at their own pace online in BL.
- Their anxiety level is lowered.

- Because students engage online in more thoughtful discussions, they have time to craft their responses.
- Students develop multi-modal literacy skills.
- It builds computer literacy/digital literacy and real-world skills.
- It supports learner autonomy and self-reflection.
- Students come prepared to work and interact at school.
- Students complete most individual activities online; it leaves time for communication, practice, and interaction when f2f.
- Students have more choice. More personalized learning.
- It increases motivation when topics and tasks are relevant to students' lives.
- BL can accommodate a variety of learning styles.
- BL supports diverse needs of students' lives and schedules, allows students at higher levels to continue to study by choice; and improves attendance, engagement, and retention.
- BL supports the teacher and eases implementation of PBLA.
- It expands access to knowledge/information for students and teachers.
- BL eases independence and the transition out of LINC 8 by building a resource base for practice outside of the classroom [Note: Students exited the school board program at the end of LINC 8].

(Andrada, Anabelle, Eleanor; Teacher Interviews and Questionnaires)

Participation, engagement and retention

Teachers noted that attendance improved due to BL. "Attendance is really good... Students seem to look forward to sharing what they've done online and learn more in class... Class time is more focused as students come prepared to share, discuss, and do follow up activities based on their online work at home." (Andrada, Teacher Interview). Eleanor noted how increasing the online component to 50 % of the learning time (from 25 % previously) had benefited the program: "When we went to 50/50 the attendance increased." (Eleanor, Teacher Interview).

Teachers explained how BL improved access and retention: "... a couple of students had to return home and they kept working online with their teacher. If their kids are sick, they can work from home." (Anabelle, Teacher Interview). Andrada explained how students could "catch up" via the online activities if they missed class due to illness or work: "They always communicate with me through EduLINC messaging and write their classmates to find out what they need to work on. It is very rare that what we work on in class is not available online [as well] ..." (Andrada, Teacher Interview). Eleanor noted: "There was faster turnover (of students) before BL; retention increased."

The program administrator noted: "... [BL] provides flexibility for part time workers and because of daycare issues. ... Monthly reports show that blended learning classes had higher attendance on average (than non-blended LINC classes). In one BL class with EduLINC, average attendance is 95 % plus; 89 % across all [blended classes]." (Gladys, Program Administrator Interview).

Student autonomy, motivation, and learning beyond the classroom

Teachers valued the student autonomy, motivation, and connections beyond the classroom and enhanced learner-centred instruction. Anabelle explained: "Students have freedom to choose activities that are of interest to them...it's not all about what I say. It's interesting for students." (Anabelle, Teacher Interview). She noted how TELL allowed her to integrate engaging and valuable "real world" topics and tasks into the program – for example, Anabelle had students listen to the news online every morning, take notes, discuss in groups and then present to the class.

Eleanor noted the impact of self-directed learning for students: "...especially for [my class], BL can build independent learning skills because I am not there all the time. It's good because some have anxiety about what will happen after they leave LINC 8 since they will be on their own." (Teacher Interview).

BL enhanced student attention. Andrada explained: "Class time is more focused as students come prepared to share, discuss, and do follow up activities based on their online work at home." She gave the example of students selecting their own vocabulary learning resources: "Students explore a variety of online resources for vocabulary development, evaluate them, and select according to personal preferences and styles." (Teacher Interview).

Group activities introduced in class and through the online EduLINC activities extended student connections outside of class. "With the project work students build relationships in class and continue that work outside of class...for example, for the garage sale activity they went out to the community to distribute flyers..." (Annabelle, Teacher Interview).

Enhanced technology use and skills

The teachers' insights about the benefits of technology had resulted in the BYOD policy at the school. This increased students' use of technologies—wifi was made available at the school to support the blended program and mobile devices that students used; also, additional laptops and iPads were purchased.

Teachers recognized the learning that the online aspects of the BL approach added to students' lives and learning, as well as their own teaching. Andrada elaborated:

Technology has created an opportunity to apply the interactionist and social constructivist approaches to language learning in an unprecedented way; accessibility to and involvement in the larger community is within students' reach when appropriately supported and guided. When our students are newcomers often struggling to understand and adapt to life in a new country, this is even more important. Social networking and mobile devices can definitely support this, among others. I strongly believe that when technology becomes "part of the environment" in the classroom, it actually mirrors real life use and increases the chances for more student engagement. For example, students in my class don't use a computer lab, but the laptops are brought into the classroom. They also have access to wifi and can use their own devices, so, quite often, when feasible, quite a few of them prefer to use mobile devices/smart phones or iPads; these devices allow for a smoother integration of technology into the lesson. We might start with a needs assessment Twitter poll to narrow down the topic (students have Twitter accounts, which are protected and used exclusively for school communication, learning, and community connections), continue with a f2f discussion, access resources online, share information through short group presentations, and finally, reflect on the activities in a blog (all of the online activities available through EduLINC/Moodle). (Teacher Questionnaire)

Teacher knowledge, curriculum development, and PBLA

In effect, BL shaped the teachers' approach and teacher knowledge for LINC instruction as they expanded its potential. The teachers had learned how to implement the blended approach through

formal studies (LearnIT2teach training and other courses) and on-the job learning in trying out BL activities with students. Andrada explained: “I am very interested in the use of mobile technology and educational apps that I explore on a continuous basis...” She explained that she was “...continuously learning new things and trying to improve my delivery. The LearnIT2teach website with its many resources is very useful in this respect (the EducLINC Live Chat is also an excellent support); my mentor is a great resource, too.” Teachers demonstrated how authentic settlement and English language practice activities could be more readily developed via the variety of resources and technologies in BL when combined to complement each other. As a result, the LINC curriculum and program were enhanced by the development of BL by the teachers.

And teachers remarked that BL had actually eased the implementation of student assessment by PBLA that is required in LINC. The teachers here stressed how all learning activities were planned with the PBLA requirements in mind so that students would have appropriate and sufficient artefacts to demonstrate their achievements; and, how BL increased the opportunity for including PBLA tasks. This is noteworthy since many LINC teachers have previously indicated “growing pains” experienced in LINC as they coped with difficulties in implementing the PBLA (Desyatova, 2018).

Some challenges

Not all effects of BL were seen in a completely positive light. Paper-based portfolios were a challenge for implementing PBLA efficiently in BL as teachers and students struggled to print the PBLA artefacts to document student progress. Plans for an electronic portfolio solution as part of the new development of an augmented Moodle LMS by the end of March 2020 was a hugely welcomed improvement for further integrating the PBLA into the blended LINC program (LearnIT2teach, 2019, para. 1).

Teachers also indicated that in the past wifi access had occasionally been “spotty” at the school, but that had stabilized and technologies available for use in the classes had been added. Overall, the teachers recommended more tech support be provided at the school. They noted that “LearnIT2teach support, plus live chat and mentors were very much appreciated and useful.”

Another challenge was planning for BL. Teachers explained: “Online work needs to be carefully planned and all details dealt with properly, which is time consuming.” Integration of the PBLA with BL was both required and time intensive. However, on the “upside,” teachers noted that implementation of PBLA had been eased because of the online activities. BL allowed more PBLA tasks to be done online by students providing more flexibility and time for these activities.

Summary

Students and teachers in this research indicated a high level of support for BL. Their commitment stemmed from their recognition of BL as a means to authentic learning of language, technology, and settlement or life skills, as well as the flexibility which enhanced student access, participation, and motivation. Benefits for learning, teaching, curriculum and program development, and improvements in implementation of PBLA and LINC activities were valued results of BL.

Although teachers noted that they needed more designated time for professional development and collaborative preparation of online blended activities, they were committed to BL teaching as highly effective.

In the words of one of these teachers:

Blended learning transcends the classroom walls; it's engaging and creative; it connects us with the larger community; it breaks the potential isolation of traditional, classroom-based language learning; it's flexible. It's also sometimes challenging – as a teacher using this approach you have to update skills and knowledge continuously. You become a learner yourself, which I love. (Andrada, Teacher Interview)

Conclusion

BL as seen in this study is a preferred approach by both LINC learners and teachers. A combined approach mirrors the world we are used to living in as our environments are increasingly digitized. Adding learning supports to the f2f classroom that extend beyond the classroom walls adds value to students' learning making it more easily accessible via technology. The BL approach demonstrated an effective way forward in implementing technology in language learning related to students' English language and settlement needs while supporting their need to be at work and attend to home responsibilities part time.

This research project demonstrated the effects of the BL approach in an exemplary BL LINC program and settlement English language learning in Canada. Important benefits were shown in relation to: (i) students' participation and access in LINC; (ii) students' English language learning and confidence for using English; (iii) students' knowledge and self-efficacy for using technology for learning and achieving their settlement goals; and, (iv) for teacher development, instruction, and curriculum integration, including implementation of PBLA. Findings show how effectively managed opportunities for BL in LINC improve access, participation, and effectiveness of settlement language training programs; how students develop knowledge and confidence for using technology for learning; and, how teacher expertise and programming is enhanced.

This project also demonstrated how a local vision for BL as recommended by Sturm *et al.* (2018) had been practically implemented through the thoughtful leadership of administration and invested LINC instructors – a local vision of BL for language instruction that takes the needs of learners, the expertise of teachers, and available resources of the context into account. This promising program model for the delivery of BL in settlement English language learning demonstrated potential for adaptation in similar contexts in the future. Indeed, BL was shown to “work” – to enhance participation, engagement, and learning of English by students, as well as to develop important technology skills for English language learning and settlement needs.

Questions about the implementation of BL approaches in English language learning programs remain. There is no one-size-fits all approach to BL implementation. However, through this research, we have seen how a strong sense of an online community can add to the classroom experience and benefit learning when teaching presence and learner engagement are at the forefront and activities are relevant to students' lives. In BL approaches, teachers are an “...essential part of the educational experience in the classroom and online;... learning content should be meaningful to the lives of learners and the technologies should be used when it is appropriate to developing a skill or constructing and communicating ideas, opinions and knowledge” (AlphaPlus, 2019, p. 4).

In 2013, major stakeholders from across Canada attended the IRCC-funded Vision 2020 National Settlement Conference to discuss a “2020 Vision for the Settlement Program.” The agenda recommended more responsive delivery to ensure positive, comparable newcomer outcomes (e.g., via new methods and use of technology). In light of these trends towards expanding use of technology in English language settlement programs, further research into the impact of the BL approach, as well as the development of more programs, more teacher development, and more resources for BL will be

needed to ensure that newcomers continue to reap benefits in the blended classroom.

A LINC student participant in this demonstration project recommended BL in this way: “This is the best method for modern society.” (Student Interview). Work needs to be done by all stakeholders—teachers, providers, TESL programs, researchers, and funders – towards advancing BL to provide the best in LINC English language learning according to the needs of learners and society.

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