

## Researching the Effects of Blended Learning in LINC: A Demonstration Research Project

### Executive Summary

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## BACKGROUND

**Blended learning** describes a teaching and learning environment in which face-to-face (f2f) classroom instruction and learning are “combined or ‘blended’ with online and other computer-mediated activities.” (Kennel & Moriarty, 2014, n.p.). A relatively recent innovation and addition to classes in Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs, research into blended learning in LINC has been limited. During September, 2017 – June, 2018, LearnIT2Teach conducted a research demonstration project with a school board program in British Columbia to examine and demonstrate the effects of blended learning for students, teachers, and programs.

The details of the research and its implications are summarized here before publication of the final report on the project in December, 2018. This blended learning demonstration project was carried out with 45 student participants in LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) levels 6 – 7/8 classes, three of their instructors, and the program manager and resource support teacher at a LINC program in British Columbia. An established LINC school board program, which had implemented blended learning effectively since 2012, was selected as the site of the research. This research project was implemented according to a demonstration research approach to examine the effects of the blended learning approach in LINC in an authentic and exemplary practice context.

Demonstration project models (or, a demonstration approach) are often used in education and health care as an applied research approach to closely examine applications of approaches and innovations as they unfold in “real time” in context – in this research, the blended learning approach. The purpose of a demonstration project is to see real applications of innovations in progress in order to extrapolate possible extensions and adaptations of these innovations (blended learning) to additional classes and contexts. There is often a distinction made between two types of demonstration research projects – experimental and exemplary. The latter, the exemplary approach, was chosen for this research as the school board program presented as an effective, well-developed model of blending learning for English language instruction and CALL (computer-assisted language learning) that has the potential for adoption, extension, and adaptation to various LINC/ESL contexts for the benefits of learners, teachers, and programs.

The research project demonstrated considerable effects and benefits for: (i) LINC students’ participation and engagement in LINC and their English language learning, as well as achievement of other settlement goals; (ii) for students’ self-efficacy and knowledge for using technology for learning; (iii) and, for the LINC teachers, instruction, and the program. Effective or “best practices” for teaching and learning via a blended approach became increasingly evident; as well as challenges and needs still to be addressed.

The project was researched through multiple activities and data – multiple classroom and online activity observations, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with student and teacher participants, a self-efficacy student questionnaire re. knowledge and use of technology, student focus group discussions, and collection of artifacts such as lesson plans and student prepared

presentations about blended learning. A baseline of the students' English language proficiency at the outset of the project was determined by having students take the CELPIP test (Canadian English Language Proficiency Index Program) at the beginning of their participation in the research. This showed that most student participants in the project had attained English language proficiency at Canadian Language Benchmark levels (CLB) consistent with their LINC classes, which were one LINC 6 class and two LINC 7/8 classes.

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## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings and implications are detailed here according to the effects of blended learning for 1) students; then, (2) teachers and the program.

Students expressed high satisfaction with the blended learning program approach and teaching. They explained that blended learning was a means to learn English as their schedules often did not allow them to study full time due to work or home responsibilities. Students were keen to continue in these blended learning classes that provided them with high quality teaching/learning f2f in the classroom (either three days or two evenings a week) with co-ordinated online learning activities and teaching via EduLINC part time throughout the remainder of the week.

It was noted that these blended classes developed students' engagement and motivation for learning English – there was high interest. Participation and retention in LINC classes were improved due to the blended nature of the program. The program manager of the blended program explained that in one blended class there was 95 % attendance and participation; and, overall class attendance of 89%. Students and teachers both emphasized that the interaction and integration of classroom with online activities was highly effective for learning and participation.

The English language learning gains and confidence for using English were expressed by the students in their focus group discussion activities and interviews. They explained how the blended learning program had resulted in development of their English language skills for work, seeking employment, communication with their children's teachers, and integration in the community. Students expressed high satisfaction with the independence in learning English and discipline that they developed because they were required to complete activities online during the part of the week when they were not in f2f classes.

Considerable interaction between the use of the technology that students' experienced in the blended program and students' growing efficacy for using technology for learning English and other settlement goals was frequently indicated. Students expressed high satisfaction with their familiarity with technology and online learning modes and media. They expressed the need to continue in the blended learning program; as well as asked for its extension to more advanced levels beyond LINC 7/8 and provision of academic preparation studies for purposes of transition to post-secondary studies at the college or university levels or preparation for requalification in their professions and trades.

For example, in response to interview questions about the blended learning approach and what he would tell a friend or new student about the blended learning

classes, Abraham (Student Interview) explained that both he and his wife enjoyed coming to school “so much”. They both worked during the day. Abraham expressed surprise that they enjoyed being back in school – “We think it’s weird that we enjoy it so much.” Abraham and his wife were both doctors and wanted to achieve high levels of English as they would like to go back to their profession. Abraham went on to explain that he would tell a friend or new student that the blended class is great – the teacher, place, and schedule for people who work is convenient. “It is worth it!” (Abraham, Student Interview).

Another student, Aleesa (Student Interview) emphasized the benefits of blended learning as preparation for post-secondary studies and independent learning, and that the blended program allowed her to manage her time better through the flexibility it allowed. “In a blended class you prepare to study for post-secondary; it also prepares you for the workplace; and supports the independent learning.” She explained how online learning helped her balance school, work, and personal life. “It helps me improve my life and build my future.” She expressed satisfaction that the blended LINC classes prepared her for the workplace, developed independent learning skills, and also helped her prepare to study for post-secondary programs. Aleesa explained that she was so pleased with the blended program that she had already recommended it to her Facebook group – about 2,000 Russian speaking mothers living in the lower mainland area of British Columbia. “I think it’s great!” (Aleesa, Student Interview).

Alin (Student Interview) explained, as did most of the other students, that the flexibility and access to learning English of the blended program was beneficial: “It’s great for someone with a job and busy schedule.”

Hala (Student Interview) talked about the intergenerational benefits of this learning approach, explaining that she was able to do online learning assignments and because of this approach knew how to help her daughter: “The platform used by my daughter at school is similar to the one in LINC (EduLINC).” Hala also explained how it is a very useful approach – “the combination is good: to learn English and how to use technology at the same time.”

Michael (Student Interview) also explained the benefits of learning via technology: “Computer is very popular right now. I cannot imagine life without a computer. I learn directly and indirectly English when using a computer.” Another student recognized the technological learning that came with the blended approach. SweetCoco2 admitted: “The first day of class, I was shocked. I realized I didn’t really have the skills.” However, she explained that she decided it was an opportunity, a challenge to get the skills she needed in these times 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.”

Students also frequently talked about the number of technological communication skills and activities that they used in the context of the blended learning classes that helped them with their settlement in Canada, jobs, and day-to-day life. Aleesa (Student Interview) explained how she used computers for learning English as well as a lengthy list of activities: Buying and selling things; searching for community events/medical services; education for her daughter; communications with her 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 re. volunteer work, the Work B.C. program; communicating with service providers such as B.C. Hydro...

All students indicated high satisfaction with how the f2f activities and learning “blended” with the online activities. In their focus group discussions they explained: “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.”

In the focus groups, students expressed that they valued the online component provided through EduLINC – opportunities to learn independently and on flexible schedules, which enabled students to study English while they were taking care of their family; preparing for further study; obtaining professional certification; and looking for work. They emphasized that integrated applications within EduLINC such as POODLL and links to online resources outside of it such as Quizlet and Typing.com helped them to prepare for the next f2f class. They were able to increase their participation in and understanding of activities, and to review new material and vocabulary, and listen to and practice pronunciation before f2f classes.

Students noted their growing awareness and use of technology not only in day-to-day tasks but also in their learning of English. Abraham (Student Interview) explained that he relied heavily on his smartphone: “I use it for every single step that I take.” For example, he reads, listens, and views content from the New York Times because he is interested in politics. He listens to music in English and uses Google Maps. Abraham explained that he was “hungry for information – after all the restrictions in the 1st country.” Jin (Student Interview) said that it was easy to check information and faster to find out about grammar in EduLINC. She uses a dictionary on the phone to look up words and an app that allows her to type and record audio notes. Jin also uses Google to search for information and apps on her phone to chat with people. She uses a news app in English and shops on the phone. Papula (student interview) uses her phone and laptop in school and at home. She looks at websites on her phone to study English. Papula said that the “phone is easier, I don’t have to shut it down” like a laptop. She also uses websites recommended by the teacher to find jobs.

Challenges and needs of the blended approach explained by students included:

- Need for access to more speaking and listening practice and activities.
- Need for more academic preparation studies and learning activities for those preparing for study at the post-secondary level or re-qualification in their profession.
- Extension of studies beyond LINC 7/8.
- More availability of childcare and access to these services (there were continued wait lists for childcare programs at the school).
- More online time for students to connect with their teacher and get feedback online.



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## EFFECTS OF BLENDED LEARNING FOR TEACHING, INSTRUCTORS, AND THE PROGRAM

The three LINC teacher participants – Andrada (LINC 6/Day), Anabelle (LINC 7/8/Day), and Eleanor (LINC 7/8/Evening) – had achieved a high level of expertise, experience, and training in teaching with technology through LearnIT2Teach training and other teaching with technology courses. They saw their responsibilities as including a full range of teaching activities – curriculum development, lesson preparation and development of complementary online and f2f classroom activities, facilitation of both online and f2f instruction, and assessment. These teachers expressed confidence and a high degree of satisfaction in using the blended learning approach in teaching LINC. Each noted that learning language via technology empowered students both in their English language learning and in developing much-needed technology skills that would both serve them well in their settlement in Canada.

The teachers' understanding of the settlement needs and interests of students were central to their teaching and curriculum development. This was expressed through their deep appreciation and commitment to developing the learning and skills that the online/technology-assisted aspects of the blended learning approach added to students' learning, as well as their own teaching. Above all, the teachers recognized how students benefited from learning technological skills at the same time as developing their language skills while advancing their settlement needs.

Andrada highlighted this in a profound way as she reflected on readings that distinguished TELL (technology-enhanced language learning) and CALL (computer-assisted language learning). Andrada had encountered these readings and concepts in the LearnIT2Teach Learning Technology Innovation Leadership Course she had taken in 2016. She explained that she “strongly believed that when technology became part of the environment in the classroom, it actually mirrored real life use and increased the chances for more student engagement.” For example, students in her class don't use a computer lab, but the laptops are brought into the classroom (class sets of tablets and laptops were provided via mobile technology carts for classroom use). They also have access to wifi and can use their own devices, so many prefer to use mobile devices/smart phones or iPads as these devices allow for a smoother integration of technology into the lesson. Andrada added that she sometimes started a lesson 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); then continued with a f2f discussion, accessed resources online, shared information through short group presentations, and finally, reflected on the activities in a blog (all of the online activities available through EducLINC/Moodle). (Andrada, Teacher Interview)

Andrada explained further: “I am very interested in the use of mobile technology and educational apps that I explore on a continuous basis...”. In talking about her level of comfort in using the blended approach in LINC, 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 (Live Chat is also an excellent support); my mentor is a great resource, too.” She went on to note that she didn’t believe that computer labs were the solution for blended learning (except for individual study), and that she “...favoured the use of mobile technology when students are at school.” This LINC program not only provided two class sets of mobile technology for use in the classrooms, but also provided wifi and supported a “bring your own device” (BYOD) policy at the school to encourage English language learning via students’ own mobile devices. In effect, blended learning and being responsible for developing online activities to complement students’ face-to-face learning had shaped Andrada’s thinking about and approach to teaching. She appreciated and demonstrated through her teaching of LINC how authentic settlement resources and experiences, technology and English language practice and learning could be developed together using a variety of media, resources technologies, and learning activities when skillfully implemented to complement each other. (Andrada, Teacher Interview)

Andrada and Eleanor (Teacher Interviews) pointed out the numerous benefits of blended learning that they noted through their observations of student work and teaching every day:

- Students work at their own pace online.
- Their anxiety level is lowered.
- Because students engage online in more thoughtful discussions they have time to craft their responses and come prepared for class to contribute more in f2f activities and discussions.
- Students have more chances to share with everybody, for example, reading forum posts, especially when the topic is of interest, is one of the students’ favourite activities.
- More reserved students enjoy sharing online.
- It supports problem solving and creative skills; develops critical thinking.
- It teaches netiquette.
- It supports learner autonomy and self-reflection.
- Students complete most individual activities online; it leaves time for communication and interaction when f2f.
- Students come prepared to work and interact at school.
- It increases motivation when topics and tasks are relevant to students’ lives and engaging.
- Students have more choice.
- More personalized learning.
- Students develop multi-modal literacy skills.
- Blended learning can accommodate a variety of learning styles.
- It leads to direct communication and connection with the teachers for exchange of information and support.

Andrada found that blended learning enhanced student attention in class. She noted: “Class time is more focused as students come prepared to share, discuss, and to do follow up activities based on their online work at home.” She explained the learner investment and autonomy that the blended learning approach cultivated: “As a result, the teacher is not the dispenser of information anymore; students are, and they have more choice and control over their learning.” She explained how learner-control and active engagement in their own learning were thus enhanced by the blended approach. She gave the example of individual student selection of



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.”

Anabelle (LINC 7/8/Day) was also experienced (LearnIT2Teach Stages 1 and 2 training) and highly enthusiastic about the blended learning approach and the learner-centred focus and autonomy that it created. When asked how she enjoyed teaching English this way, she noted: “I do [enjoy it]. 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 taught the LINC 7/8 workplace-related class. She explained that she not only focused on the workplace but facilitated topics the rest of the school was talking about and added workplace-related topics and issues. She stressed: “I think it’s important for students to have something to talk about and they have to be immersed in the culture.” That is why she “use(d) mainly real-world topics.” For example, she had students listen to the news every morning, to take notes, and to share in groups and then present to the class.

Anabelle explained the project-based approach that she used with her blended learning LINC 7/8 class. She integrated online skills practice of grammar, listening, and vocabulary with real life listening, reading, writing, and speaking activities in her f2f class in group-based activities. She emphasized that this blended learning, activities-based approach kept students engaged and active – “project work keeps them motivated; working in pairs or groups. Students love working on the computer.” She noted that many of her students already know a lot of computer skills and explained that because students didn’t watch much TV in English at home that the computer and online learning via EduLINC gave them a tool to improve their English language learning... “they are not afraid to use it – even at home.” In talking about the benefits of the blended approach, Anabelle explained that it helped prepare students to ask questions in class: “They have more time to think about things. They work online and research themselves before asking the teacher. The questions are more detailed.” She also noted: “The ones who are very shy participate more because they have some information.” And she explained how the online materials and activities were useful for students: “...to go back and look at items that they had done before.”

Anabelle also noted how these group activities introduced in class and through the online EduLINC practice extended 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...”.

Eleanor also explained that “...especially for LINC 7/8, blended learning 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.”

Andrada, Anabelle, and Eleanor explained the benefits of the integrated approach and use of authentic or “real life” resources and skills made possible through the blended learning classes. These were observed in the highly developed lesson plans observed and collected during the research. Andrada illustrated how the building of learning and language skills were enabled because the teacher was able to draw

on both f2f teaching/learning and online, technology-assisted learning in an integrated and complementary way using authentic tasks and resources that were interesting and relevant to students.

Each teacher stressed how PBLA (portfolio-based assessment) in LINC, which required students to create and collect language learning activities and to demonstrate their learning via these tasks in a conference with their teacher(s) at least twice a year, impacted both f2f and online teaching in the blended program. Andrada, Anabelle, and Eleanor explained how all teaching and learning activity was planned and integrated with PBLA in mind so that students would have appropriate and sufficient assessment artifacts to demonstrate their achievement via the PBLA. The program and students at the time of the research in 2017-2018 were using paper-based portfolios. Teachers emphasized the need for development of more and more focused resources in EduLINC that would serve the ever present PBLA needs of students, and particularly a wish for access to a user friendly online or e-portfolio.

Several more “concrete” effects of blended learning were noted by these teachers. These included the acquisition of more learning technology for use in the school, particularly for the blended learning classes. The supervisor and manager of these school board programs, Gladys (pseudonym), also participated in this study. She was quick to note the technology that blended learning added to the school board programs: “We have desktop computers in class and two class sets of laptops for teachers to book. Students can bring their ipads and phones to use the wifi (at school).”

Student engagement in learning and retention in the LINC program was another benefit noted by the teachers and the LINC manager. When asked about how blended learning affected student attendance, Andrada explained: “Attendance is usually really good... Students seem to look forward to sharing what they’ve done online and learn more in class; the secret is to choose topics and activities that they find relevant”.

Anabelle explained how blended learning helped retain students in the program: “...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.” Similarly, Andrada explained how students used the online activities to review and “catch up” if they missed a 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...”

And Eleanor, who taught LINC 7/8 in the evenings, noted: “There was faster turnover (of students) before blended learning; retention increased.” She explained how increasing the online component to 50 per cent of the learning time (from 25 per cent) had improved attendance: “When we went to 50/50 the attendance increased.”

Eleanor also explained that blended learning “...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.”

Gladys highlighted that blended learning “...provides flexibility for part-time workers and because of daycare issues.” She explained attendance in this way: “Monthly reports show that blended learning classes have slightly higher attendance on average (than non-blended LINC classes). In one class with f2f classes and EduLINC, average attendance is 95%; and 89% across all classes.”

As for the popularity or interest of students in the blended classes, teachers indicated that students who had to leave the class or move up to another level often asked for permission to stay enrolled in the class because of the resources.

Challenges and demands of the blended approach explained by teachers included the following:

Teachers highlighted that planning for blended learning was “time intensive” and demanding.

One teacher noted: “Online work needs to be carefully planned and all details dealt with properly, which is time consuming.”

Another teacher highlighted that “it takes a serious amount of time to implement this approach, especially in the first year or two of transitioning from the regular approach to blended.” They emphasized that regular paid PD and preparation time need to be provided for teachers.

The program manager noted: “Students say that they love it (blended learning); teachers like it but say it is an awful amount of work.”

Another teacher expressed the time challenges of planning for blended learning in this way: “It’s more time-consuming, but once you get in the swing of things, it’s okay. Sometimes it’s hard to find topics that are appropriate; requires a lot of work to make activities, and it’s hard to write reliable, valid assessments.”

Teachers also indicated that in the past wifi access had occasionally been “spotty” at the school, but that had stabilized; improvements and additions to technologies available for use in the classes had been added. Overall, the teachers recommended more tech support be provided at the school. However, they noted that LearnIT2Teach support, plus live chat and mentors “were very much appreciated and useful.” One teacher explained that she was not sure that instructors were fully aware of the resources and support available.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reliable and sufficient technology resources, devices and support, and wifi for blended learning are needed at the program level.
- Leadership re. blended learning approaches, needs, and professional development support for administrators to support implementation and delivery.
- Program supports such as childcare and resource/staff persons to assist with community and settlement resources in the program are highly used and need extension.

- More and extended opportunities for students to continue in blended language learning beyond LINC 7/8 levels, including more academic preparation and English study opportunities via blended learning for students to reach for their education, employment, and professional certification goals.
- More LINC curriculum development support to ease the implementation of PBLA into the blended learning curriculum and EducLINC delivery, particularly an electronic PBLA portfolio system and resources.
- “Transitions” to blended learning classes for students to become effectively oriented and practiced in the technology and resources used in the blended classes are recommended (the school board program researched had begun Transition to blended learning classes in September, 2017; and, these evolved to include a blended component).
- More “block” intake of students into blended learning and transition classes (rather than continuous intake).
- More development of EducLINC and inclusion of blended learning activities and access via mobile devices, apps, and technology as evidenced from the learning advantages and popular use of smart phones and tablets in the classes.
- Time, strategies, and a variety of means for teacher engagement with students in the online, blended learning activities that enhance teaching presence and “connectedness” of online teaching/learning to the f2f class, including messaging, discussion forums, social media, video conferencing, skills practice including speaking and pronunciation, PBLA tasks, focus groups, online as well as f2f teacher feedback...
- More development and inclusion of synchronous activities between teacher and students and amongst students online via video conferencing activities to further develop speaking and listening in the blended learning curriculum.
- Designated teacher preparation time for development and implementation of blended learning materials and curriculum.
- Designated teacher professional development and training time.
- Development of a community of professional practice for teachers and managers to present, share, and adapt strategies, activities, and resources.
- Development of a model and plan for the blended learning approach that more specifically describes effective foundations and strategies for implementation and delivery of blended learning in LINC programs.
- More development and research into transition to blended learning needs of students and research and development of transition courses with blended learning components.
- More research of blended learning with a variety of classes, levels, students, and contexts to identify additional needs of students and teachers in other contexts (for example, other LINC levels, literacy needs and learning; academic preparation).

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## CONCLUSION

The students and teachers in this school board program indicated a high level of engagement with and enthusiasm for the blended learning approach. The benefits they highlighted included accessibility to English language learning beyond a classroom. But above and beyond that, they demonstrated commitment to learning through this approach as a means to authentic learning of language, technology, and settlement or “life” skills, as well as the benefits of autonomy and flexibility. In the words of one of the LINC student participants in this research project: “This is the best method for modern society.” (Student Interview). Teachers may have noted that they needed more paid time available to them for professional development and preparation of online, blended activities and resources; however, they were committed to teaching in this way as highly effective.

The blended learning program showcased in this demonstration project shows that resistance to “technology innovation adoption” (Rogers, 2005) for blended learning can be overcome in the LINC context. This is demonstrated by the program development and teacher and management leadership evidenced in the LINC program presented here. The findings show how effectively managed opportunities for blended learning in LINC improve student access and participation in settlement language training; increase learner engagement and the effectiveness of English language learning programs; develop knowledge and confidence for using technology for learning and settlement needs; and, enhance teacher expertise and satisfaction with teaching/learning via technology assisted learning.

We recommend attention to these primary issues in light of background studies and trends that indicate the move towards technology-assisted language learning and blended learning will continue. Recent studies in learning, teaching, and education in general show a rapidly developing trend toward blended learning and its benefits. In 2013, major stakeholders from across Canada attended the CIC-funded Vision 2020 National Settlement Conference to discuss the theme of “2020 Vision for the Settlement Program”. The agenda included consideration of more responsive delivery to ensure positive, comparable newcomer outcomes (e.g., new methods and use of technology). In light of growing trends for increasing use of technology in teaching and learning, research and development of the blended learning approach as proposed here is needed to ensure that newcomers do reap the benefits of technology in the classroom for English language learning and settlement.

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## FURTHER READING

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