



## **Accelerated Business English Performance through Blended Learning: a Case Study with Virtual Coaching**

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*Blended learning combines online self-study with human coaching, which can be in person or virtual. This white paper presents a case study of a custom blended learning program created by GlobalEnglish for a large, multi-national technology company. Twenty-one employees needed to make significant, rapid progress in Business English proficiency in order to fulfill new job responsibilities. After six months, six participants who had studied Business English full-time improved an average of 50% (from Beginner to Low Intermediate), and 14 participants who had studied Business English for 4.5 hours per week improved an average of 9 to 12%. By the end of the program, participants were able to successfully assume global roles in their organization.*

### **1. Introduction**

Learning English as a second or foreign language is a time-consuming endeavor. Although the time it takes to learn English varies by individual and native language, research on ESL (English as a Second Language) suggests that learners need at least 500 hours of direct instruction to attain everyday communication skills, and years to achieve proficiency.[1][2][3][4] Within the traditional classroom paradigm, it is difficult to make accelerated progress without enrolling in an intensive language program. Even then, success is far from guaranteed.

In today's business environment, however, professionals typically do not have the time, budget or desire to attend a residential immersion program. For this and other reasons, computer-assisted language learning via the Internet (also referred to as "e-learning," "online learning," or "web-based learning," among other terms) has become a common methodology in corporate training.[5] Adults with computer and Internet skills commonly report positive attitudes towards such programs.[6][7] Furthermore, computer-based courses are often cheaper than instructor-led courses, and a large body of research has demonstrated that they can be equally or more effective than traditional instruction.[8][9][10]

Organizations also frequently combine computer-based training with traditional instruction, an approach called "blended learning".[11][12] Although blended learning has historically included face-to-face components, it has become possible for blended learning to take place virtually via online communication technologies. For this study, therefore, we defined blended learning as a combination of synchronous human interaction (face-to-face, or virtual) and independent online study.

Using a case study methodology, we examined two questions currently unanswered in the research literature:

1. Can an intensive program with both in-person and virtual blended learning modalities help adults significantly improve their Business English proficiency in a relatively short time frame (about six months)?
2. Can a completely virtual blended program also produce significant and rapid gains in Business English proficiency in the same time frame?

### **2. The Blended Learning Programs**

GlobalEnglish, a global provider of enterprise Business English solutions owned by Pearson PLC, designed two blended learning programs that combined various pedagogical methods to meet the client's specific needs. The GlobalEnglish product suite available to participants in this study provided formal and informal Business English learning opportunities, expert real-time coaching, on-the-job support for business tasks, collaboration tools, mobile practice and reference, adaptive Business English assessments, and the ability to track activity and progress. The six individuals in the full-time group received daily in-person and online instruction and practice for a total of 34.5 hours per week. The part-time group took part in virtual blended learning for 4.5 hours per week.

#### **2.1 Asynchronous online study**



During asynchronous study, participants progressed independently through the GlobalEnglish on-demand Business English curriculum, for up to 2.5 (part-time) or 17 (full-time) hours per week. GlobalEnglish Edge™ is a structured online curriculum designed for adults. It has eleven courses or "Levels", from Low Beginner to Advanced. The curriculum is aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference, and spans A1 (Breakthrough/Beginner) to C1 (Effective operational proficiency/Advanced).[13]

Participants also had access to two online informal learning tools. The first, GlobalEnglish Bloom™, is an online platform for collaborative, social language practice. Features include the ability to complete business-focused, video-based tutorials, take interactive quizzes, pose questions and get answers from Business English experts and peers, and participate in asynchronous group discussions. The second tool, GlobalEnglish LinGo Pro™, is a mobile and web browser application that provides just-in-time learning functionality and English productivity support. It features vocabulary lists organized by topic and industry, custom word lists, flashcard practice, and the ability to look up word pronunciations, definitions and translations.

## **2.2 Synchronous virtual coaching**

All participants worked individually with a certified, native English-speaking coach for one hour, twice per week, via telephone or an Internet conferencing service (e.g., Skype), through a service called GlobalEnglish Coach™ (in partnership with ISUS/ispeakuspeak). Coaches also addressed participants' problems and questions with the online Business English curriculum, and drew from the resources available there to guide their sessions. In this way, the asynchronous and synchronous components of the blended learning programs were fully integrated.

## **2.3 In-person instruction and projects (full-time program only)**

The full-time program also included in-person (face-to-face) English language instruction and practice, and three projects. The classroom training focused on improving the participants' English speaking proficiency, with the goal of increasing their confidence and ability to perform basic professional functions in English (e.g., phone conversations, meetings, and short presentations). In the group project, participants wrote a proposal, in English, to improve an aspect of working at their company. In the two individual projects, participants used English to deliver a ten-minute presentation, either via telephone or in person, on work-related topics.

## **2.4 Assessment**

The assessment used for pre-test and post-test was the GlobalEnglish Standard Test for English Professionals Plus™ (STEP+). GlobalEnglish STEP+ is an online, hour-long computer adaptive test that includes four sections: Grammar, Listening, Reading, and Speaking. The test's raw score of 0 to 1,581 corresponds to both a GlobalEnglish curriculum level and a CEFR range.

# **3. Research methods**

## **3.1 Participants and procedure**

Twenty-one Japanese adults (14 men and 7 women) participated in a blended learning program that took place at their workplace in Japan. All were regular full-time employees of a large, multi-national technology company. There were six full-time program participants and 15 part-time program participants. Twenty participants took the pre-test in August 2012 (one participant did not take the pre-test). Those who scored at or below Level 5 (Low Intermediate) were placed into the full-time program. Programs started in September 2012, and participants took the post-test about six months later in March 2013.

# **4. Results**

In the full-time group ( $n = 6$ ), the total score improvement was large ( $M = 217$ ,  $SD = 62$ ). Although the small size of the group makes statistical inference inappropriate, in qualitative terms, the fulltime participants observed an average increase in test score from a mid-range A2 level (Waystage/Elementary) on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to a low B1 level (Threshold/Intermediate).

In the part-time group ( $n = 14$ ), the average total score improvement was 79 points ( $SD = 115$ ). This difference between pre-test and post-test was significant,  $W = 17$ ,  $Z = -2.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .60$ . The average score improvement in the part-time group was significantly affected by the presence of one outlier whose score decreased nearly 200 points (out of 1,581 possible). In Figure 1, the average

score improvement for the part-time blended group is shown without this outlier. Regardless, the average pre-test and post-test total scores within the part-time group were associated with a CEFR level of mid-B1 (Threshold/Intermediate).

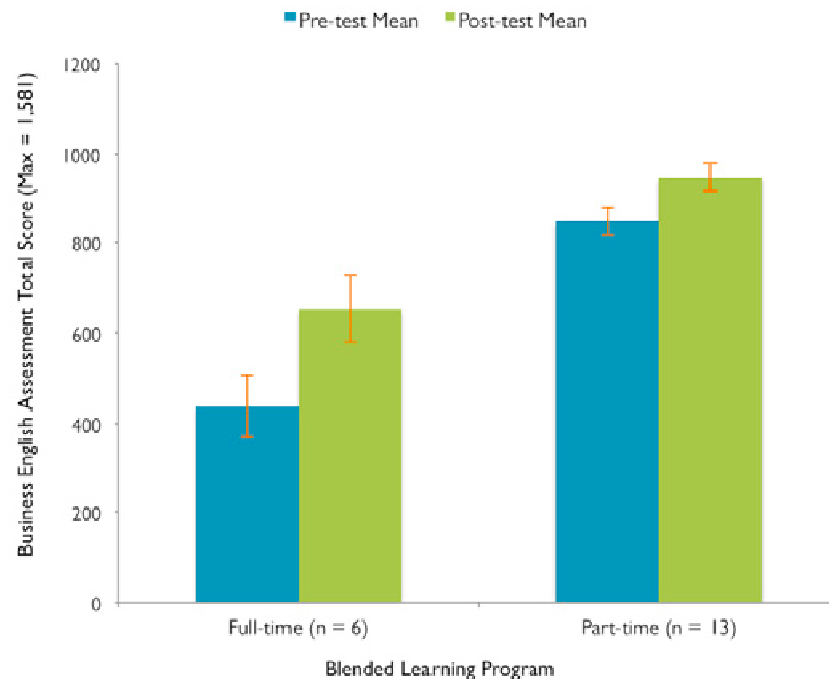


Fig 1. Mean pre-test and post-test scores by blended learning program. Bars show standard errors.

## 5. Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that virtual blended learning programs can produce significant language performance gains. A completely online course of study requiring less than five hours per week resulted in an average improvement of 9 to 12% after 126 hours of study. Among the six participants in the intensive program, average improvement was 50% and represents progress from a Beginner to Intermediate level of Business English proficiency. This rate is on par with the estimate of how long English speakers would take to make similar improvement in a moderately difficult language at the Defense Language Institute.[14][15] In real-life terms, by the end of the program, participants were able to successfully prepare and deliver a ten-minute presentation on a business topic, in English, to their manager and colleagues.

The improvements observed in both blended programs are remarkable given that it is common for language learners to show little change on proficiency tests, despite self-reported gains in language ability.[16][17][18] Among individuals living in the United States and attending workplace English classes, for example, test scores on a common adult ESL assessment increase only 3 to 7% after an average of 66 to 100 hours of direct instruction.[19][20]

A key factor for the blended learning programs' effectiveness may be high personal interactivity.[21] In a meta-analysis of 74 studies of distance education, Bernard et al. found that interactivity was positively related to both achievement and attitude towards learning.[22] In this study, the student-coach interaction was likely a strong motivating factor as well as a direct learning stimulus for participants.

Finally, this case study provides support for rethinking in-person instruction as an automatic component of blended learning. Adults who need to learn English today want maximum flexibility and choice with regard to how and when they learn; at the same time, technology is constantly improving in its capacity to connect human beings. Eliminating the need for physical travel by using virtual training can reduce costs, increase time for learning, and ensure maximum return on investment.

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