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BLENDED LEARNING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The term blended learning originated in the business world in connection with corporate training [13], then was employed in higher education [MacDonald, 2006] and lastly it appeared in language teaching and learning. From a corporate perspective, Singh and Reed [17] describe blended learning as being 'a learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome and cost of program delivery'.

With reference to blended learning in higher education, it has been defined as: 'a combination of technology and classroom instruction in a flexible approach to learning that recognizes the benefits of delivering some training and assessment online but also uses other modes to make up a complete training programme which can improve learning outcomes and/or save costs' [1]. It is the combination of traditional face-to-face and technology-mediated instruction encouraging the adoption of platforms such as online learning, mobile technologies and resources that exist in the cloud [11].

The blended learning courses do not have a clearly defined pattern which is generally true and forever valid. There are a multitude of models to choose from. Ultimately this means that there is '…no single optimal mix. What configuration is best can only be determined relative to whatever goals and constraints are presented in a given situation' [15]. Littlejohn and Pegler [7] expanded the types of blends to include the 'space blend' (face-to-face or online), 'time blend' (geography and availability), 'media blend' (tools, technologies and resources), and 'activity blend' (learning and teaching activities, individual or group). This variety of options can both pose problems and provide opportunities for course designers: what to blend and how to blend. There are six major issues that Graham [3] believes a course designer should consider prior to designing a blended learning course:

1. The role of live interaction – how necessary is the face-to-face component of the course? Certainly in English language teaching (ELT) it would seem fair to say students place a great deal of emphasis on this element of the course and that it is vital.

2. The role of learner choice and self-regulation – how much guidance should the students be given when it comes to choosing the type of blended learning course they participate in, in particular in relation to university courses?

3. Models for support and training – how to support and train the instructors and students in a blended learning environment plus provide technological support.

4. Finding balance between innovation and production – and how to do so in a cost effective way.

5. Cultural adaptation – should the materials be adapted to suit local audiences?

6. Dealing with the digital divide – can affordable blended learning models be developed to accommodate those at the bottom of the socio-economic spectrum?

There are also words of warning from Sharma and Barrett [13] that 'a blended learning course run without a principled approach may be seen as an "eclectic" blending together of course components, and can end up as rather a mish-mash … learners may suffer "the worst of both worlds".

Banados [1] provides us with an extremely informative study into a working model of blended learning used to teach English in a Chilean University, which considers the design at course level rather than lesson level. The course is comprised of four elements, which are:

1. Learners' independent work on a dedicated platform with the English online software.

2. Face-to-face English as a foreign language (EFL) classes led by teachers who are also students' online tutors.

3. Online monitoring carried out by these teachers.

4. Weekly conversation classes with native speakers of English.

Banados's [1] results indicated 'a remarkable improvement in speaking skills' in addition to 'important improvements in all the skills, especially in listening, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar'. It was also founded that students preferred face-to-face to online learning, so designed her course accordingly. This meant that the face-to-face mode was the 'lead' mode in the blend. This would seem to indicate that getting the balance right in terms of the percentage of time spent on each of the modes, and the way they are integrated, is significant.

Brotton, along with McGee and Reis [12] and Traver et al. [18] suggest that students gained confidence using the online components when given an initial introduction within the classroom setting. Providing support for online technology increases participation and reduces attrition [12]. In addition, students who have previously taken more than one online or blended course tended to experience more social, cognitive and teaching presence than learners new to the blended environment [18]. New students will need support in this area. Blended courses can be effective in promoting student success, but only if designed and delivered with care. Traver et al. [18] cautioned how poor online course design is a factor that contributes to the high attrition rate. Instructors often find difficulty finding the right "blend" of online and face-to-face components [9]. Some indicators of excellent blended teaching are facilitating student learning, communicating ideas effectively, demonstrating an interest in learning, organizing effectively, showing respect for students, and assessing progress fairly [5]. Design should be learner-centered; acknowledging students' diverse abilities and styles contributes to the success of the overall design [12;6]. When designed from the learners' perspectives, retention and success are increased [12]. Communication of the blended design, expectation, and process are key for student success [12]. Feedback and interactivity are two elements that promote student engagement in the course [12]. Manuelito [8] examined community college students in a blended science course and found that they employed a variety of self-regulated learning strategies to support their learning.

Activities that required reflection helped students refine self-regulated learning skills. She suggests that instructors foster learning in blended courses by teaching them to engage in self-regulated learning processes and behaviors rather than focusing merely on delivery of course content. Access to these processes and behaviors gives learners a feeling of greater control over the autonomous areas of blended learning, and in turn, increase success. Clear instructions, manageable assignments, and relevant activities support student responsibility for learning outside of class and participation in class [12]. Support emerges as a major theme as well. Students and faculty must have the resources and support to strengthen blended learning [5; 9]. Links to student services and practice activities helps students who may lack sufficient skills [9; 12].

As noted previously, there is a demand for flexible learning opportunities that has been driven by social, cultural, economic and political changes. Improved pedagogy is often cited as a reason for implementing a blended learning approach. Indeed the phrase 'pedagogy before technology' has been used by some reflective practitioners to stress the need to adopt technology for pedagogical reasons and because it adds value to the teaching rather than simply as an add-on. Clearly more studies to investigate the pedagogical effectiveness of blended learning in ELT are required that provide us with empirical rather than impressionistic evidence in its favour.

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