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Blended language learning

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What is blended learning and how does it work?

Blended learning as an approach is not new. Indeed, the practice of combining (blending) different learning approaches and strategies is not new. Distance learning courses have long combined blended learning through a mix of self-access content (print/video/TV/radio) and face-to-face/telephone support. 'Traditional' courses have always combined (and some still do) a variety of delivery modes that combine content such as lectures, seminars, tutorials, workshops and group work to give learners a range of learning opportunities. And of course, 'good teachers will always use more than one method or approach in their teaching, and good learners will always combine different strategies in their learning' (Marsh, 2012:3).

So we could say that the term 'blended learning' refers to every time teachers mix different media (e.g. print, audio, and video) with classroom interaction, maximising authentic input in order to support learners' output and skills development. As such, blended learning has more or less always existed, although the term itself is a mere 15 years old at most, and is now understood to mean a rich, supportive learner-centred learning environment where the 'right blend' is synonymous with effective learning (and teaching).

What is new is that today, technology combines all the different media within one environment: online. The online space facilitates learner-learner interaction, encourages incidental and exploratory learning and allows learners and teachers to stay connected outside the classroom, if they so wish. Learners can benefit from the fact that space and distance do not matter any more. Teachers and educationalists are now understanding more and more that, with the 'right blend', teachers can offer a much richer, supportive learning environment, learning opportunities increase, learning becomes more effective and the learning process becomes more enjoyable.

Learners can benefit from the fact that space and distance do not matter any more.

There are many definitions for blended learning, but they all have the following in common: they refer to two different learning environments — face-to-face (synchronous) and online (asynchronous); and they refer to combining those two learning environments in a complementary way to deliver a programme of study so that learners can be supported both within the classroom environment and outside of it. In other words, the term blended learning refers to any programme of study that is delivered by appropriately combining both synchronous interactive study (usually face-to-face) and asynchronous (individual) study (usually online).

We could go further and say, 'It's in the blend!' That is, the key to a successful blended learning approach is to use the strengths of each medium appropriately, combining the two different learning environments in an integrated way so that each medium complements one another: the classroom environment being used for what it does best, such as introducing new topics, explaining important language points or for meaningful communicative activities, and the online environment being used for what it does best, such as preparing for the next topic (by watching a video/reading a text, etc.), and/or practising and consolidating what has been learnt in class or for extra practice. Both modes of delivery put the learner at the centre of the learning process.



Thus, the term 'blended' is used to mean combining different learning environments in an integrated way and appropriately and the stress is very much on 'learning' (not teaching) — either learning in the classroom with the teacher's help and support or learning online more independently or with peer support. As Marsh (2012) remarks, 'Today blended learning can refer to any combination of different methods of learning, different learning environments, different learning styles. In short, the effective implementation of blended learning is essentially all about making the most of the learning opportunities and tools available to achieve the "optimal" learning environment.'

The key to a successful blended learning approach is to use the strengths of each medium appropriately, combining the two different learning environments in an integrated way so that each medium complements the other.

Before considering the known benefits of blended learning (and indeed what its shortcomings might be), it would be useful to remind ourselves of the key pedagogical approaches in English language teaching (ELT).

In teaching two things are interrelated: first, what to teach; then, how to teach it. The linguistic theories of the last 50 years have shed light on the former and applied linguists have given us help with the latter.

1965

In 1965, Chomsky distinguished between 'competence and performance' in language learning. For him, competence is the **linguistic system** of a language whereas performance is its use. Applied linguists started to see that learning a second language (L2) means primarily learning to comprehend it and to speak it. It became clearer that teaching must involve both comprehension and production. In 1972, Hymes' '**communicative competence**' took this distinction one step further by expanding the notion of competence to embrace what a speaker needs to know about how a language is used in particular situations for effective and appropriate communication (McCarthy & Carter, 1994).

1976

In 1976, the notion of **discourse competence** put forward by Halliday and Hasan encompassed the interrelationship of Chomsky's grammar system with Hymes' language systems in use. This inter-relationship enables language users to be discourse-competent (in either spoken or written texts) through the choices they make (as speaker/writer) at all stages of production. Taking into account the listener/reader's needs, knowledge and wishes, the speaker/writer accommodates his/her language so that the message is delivered appropriately (by using the register appropriate to the audience) and effectively (by giving the listener/reader a positive experience).

During this period of fertile methodological development, the Council of Europe made the case for a **communicative approach** to language teaching through Van Ek's *The Threshold Level* (1976). A communicative approach promotes language learning as a social activity. It has a primarily functional view of language learning and emphasises the social roles of both the speaker and the listener. It is based on three fundamental principles. The first and central one is that of **learners' needs**; the second one is that of **learner-centeredness**, which is linked to the first principle and informs teaching; and the final principle is the **primacy of the functionality of language use** over its form.

1990

In the 1990s, the Council of Europe's **Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning and Teaching** (CEFR) developed the understanding of what constitutes communication. It refers to 'communicative language competence' needed to engage in 'communicative language activities' through six scales of proficiency (from A1–C2¹). By 2001, this scale provided a systematic description of what a learner/user of a language can do at a given level in any language. The CEFR clearly views grammatical competence as 'integral to all language skills' (Council of Europe, 2001).

The Council of Europe's communicative approach and the CEFR have been decisive in helping teachers design courses appropriate to learners' needs — in other words '**what to teach**'. The learner-centeredness of a communicative approach together with the increased interest in learner autonomy in the 1980s — in Holec's words the 'ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec, 1981) — highlighted the view that teachers should look at teaching more from a learner's point of view than from a teacher's perspective, as this would help with '**how to teach**'.

1 A1 level refers to beginners, whereas C2 refers to a very high level of proficiency.

Why adopt blended learning?

It is undeniable that the linguistic theories on language teaching and learning of the last 50 years and their application in the classroom have influenced teachers worldwide. Most English language programmes have communicative competence as one of their main objectives. Learners worldwide need English to communicate. Teachers worldwide are using (more or less successfully) the Communicative Approach to teach English and the CEFR to develop level-appropriate communicative language programmes. However, time in the classroom for listening to learners, supporting them and helping them become communicatively competent is limited.

So there are at least two questions one should ask oneself:

Would a blended learning approach help teachers support their learners in the way described above? And would such an approach allow more time for communicative activities to take place in the classroom?

This section will look at answering both these two key questions.

**Learning happens everywhere,
not just in the classroom.**

Benefits of blended learning

Teaching cannot be defined separately from learning. 'It is guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn' (Brown, 2000). The role of a teacher is therefore multidimensional: it is to facilitate learning, to support learners through their learning journey, to know when to intervene (with suggestions, explanations, encouragements), and when to stand aside and observe.

Today's learners are often said to breathe technology and this must be used to the full by the teacher because learning happens everywhere, not just in the classroom. This is particularly true in this digital age of ours (Dudeny & Hockly, 2016). Online learning provides learners with the ability to be both together and apart, and to be connected to a community of learners anytime and anywhere, without being bound by time, place or situation (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).

However, we must not forget that the online environment must be learner-driven and not technology-driven (Salaberry, 2001). Technologies, mobile or otherwise, can be instrumental in language learning. They are very powerful tools for the transmission and distribution of linguistic information (input) or, in other words, aids to communication rather than a means of instruction (Chinnery, 2006). An appropriate online environment must be conceived and developed to provide support to those learning online and thus must focus on learners' needs and use technology appropriately to support these needs (Colpaert, 2004).

When the online environment within a blended approach is used appropriately, it empowers learners, provides them with rich interactive input, gives them



just-in-time support², helps them become independent learners and encourages learner discovery. When the classroom environment within a blended approach is used appropriately, it is an effective way for teachers to fulfil their multidimensional role. It gives teachers the possibility of giving more individual attention to learners, it maximises social interaction in the classroom, and it facilitates teacher–learner communication outside the classroom.

Research suggests that when online and face-to-face elements are combined, learners often place a greater value or emphasis on the face-to-face aspects of the experience (Graham, 2004). But teacher–learner communication does not stop when learners leave the classroom; it continues outside the classroom environment. And with the right blend, the classroom time can be used to maximum effect.

8 benefits of a blended approach for learners and teachers

1. Responding more appropriately to learning styles

Teachers know that each learner has generally a mix of learning styles and preferences. Traditional schooling used (and continues to use) mainly linguistic and logical teaching methods. This does not suit everyone. With blended learning, students have the opportunity to work in a way that suits them without distracting others, since they work asynchronously for part of their studies. The inherent flexibility of a blended approach allows learners to study any time they choose, anywhere and at their own pace.

A blended approach also helps teachers respond more easily to learners' different styles by maximising the strengths of each environment. It is easy for the teacher to prepare programmes of study that take into account such learning styles as:

- visual or aural (i.e. preferring to use pictures, images and sounds) through, for example, watching videos/listening to audio
- verbal (i.e. preferring to use language) through, for example, reading a text or asking learners to prepare a spoken or written text
- logical by, for example, using an inductive approach to grammar.

² 'Just in time' here means that learners are provided with the explanation or information not only that they need but also when they need it, as often as they need it and in context.

Teachers can also develop activities both online and in the classroom that would suit other learning styles such as social (interpersonal) by asking learners to cooperate in a task, or solitary (intrapersonal) by devising activities that learners can do through self-study.

Moreover, a blended approach is particularly appropriate for language learning as learners can choose visual/aural texts in preference to written texts, but they can also have both: they can watch a video/listen to audio whilst at the same time reading a transcript, thus using different senses to maximum effect.

2. A deeper approach to learning

Being able to watch a video or listen to an audio text as many times as possible without feeling inadequate or reading a text quickly to get the gist without feeling rushed (or, on the contrary, taking one's time to reflect on a text without feeling slow) makes for deeper learning. This is increased by the possibility that within an online course learners can choose their pathway through the most appropriate entry points according to their needs and interests, knowing well that they can go back to refresh their knowledge if need be before moving forward. This increases learners' motivation by empowering them: it puts them in control of their own learning, whilst at the same time benefitting them through the support embedded in a blended approach.

3. More individual attention

Any teacher is familiar with having to face at least three levels in any classroom at any given time. The top 10% made up of faster learners; the bottom 10% made up of slower learners; with the 80% bulk representing the majority of the classroom population.

Faced with these differing levels, pressed by time and the syllabus and the looming of examinations, it is only human that many of us tend to forget about the top and bottom 10%. Subconsciously we feel that the top 10% do not need our help anyway and unfortunately there is not much time for the bottom 10%. So we tend to teach the bulk, thinking that at least we can help the majority of our learners.

Blended learning helps teachers give all learners the attention they deserve by developing a course that will take learners' needs more closely into account. The high flyers are encouraged to expand their knowledge and go beyond what is required in the examination by (for example) searching for answers to their own questions online or preparing next week's topic in advance of the class.

The slower learners are provided online with the extra help they need through (for example) structured and graded activities, are able to revise and consolidate online everything that has been presented in the classroom at their own speed and in their own time or are also encouraged to read a text, view a video or listen to an audio text before the following week's lesson to be better prepared and thus be able to participate fully in the classroom interaction.

And finally, the use of a Learning Management System³ in a blended approach gives teachers a quick graphic overview of individual learners' progress, thus granting the possibility and opportunity of giving feedback to learners (to help improve their performance), as well as the ability to update and tweak course material to respond to learners' needs whenever appropriate (Kaplanis, 2013).

4. Maximising social interaction in the classroom

The classroom environment offers the social space where communication as a social activity can be best served. Blended learning maximises social interaction (communication) in the classroom by freeing up time for both the teacher and the learner. The teacher has more time to create engaging learning experiences for their learners, secure in the knowledge that learners have had time to 'rehearse' online. The teacher often takes a back seat and lets them take centre stage, lets them 'act' in the classroom or engage in real-time communication with their peers, i.e. use their language productively.

In the face-to-face environment, the learner is also able to ask questions of clarification on points of language (grammar, register, usage etc.) or at times may even take on the role of the teacher themselves by answering questions raised by their peers. The teacher also has more time to listen intently to the learners, which allows them at times to deviate from their carefully prepared plan and respond appropriately to learners' needs at a specific moment in time (Walsh, 2016).

5. Creating confident learners

It is well known that a significant obstacle to learning a second language is the fear of speaking in class based on concerns of making mistakes and looking foolish in front of one's peers. A blended approach allows learners to prepare and practise on their own

³ Learning Management Systems (LMS) is a software application for the delivery of e-learning including functions such as tracking (student progress) and reporting (on student work) together with administration and documentation.

or with their peers online before a class, 'at their own pace and in their own time and as a result come to class much better prepared for speaking activities' (Marsh, 2012:16). A blended approach can also be used by learners to revise and consolidate what they have learnt in the classroom or simply to practise more.

6. Access to rich interactive input

Blended learning offers rich interactive multimedia input that is accessed through authentic video, audio, texts and visuals/graphics providing meaningful content relevant to learners' needs and interests, either pre-selected by the teacher (for lower level learners) or discovered by learners when surfing the internet (higher levels). This rich input is one of the major elements which helps teachers devise a course that can respond to different learning styles, as mentioned above.

7. Getting just-in-time support

Access to appropriate support is an important part of the learning process and is known to increase motivation and maximise learning. In a blended approach, technology offers just-in-time support in a synchronous way by giving immediate feedback (within the online course/material), by having conferencing⁴ as appropriate, and by putting many learning tools at learners' disposal, such as language functions, many different types of activities, cultural notes, grammar notes (with practice), a glossary etc., which are accessed when needed. It is also offered in an asynchronous way, incorporating websites, forums and chat rooms (see also McCarthy, 2016).

Just-in-time support, like flexibility of access, puts the onus to learn on the learners themselves by increasing their decision-making, thus putting them more in control of their learning. This in turn is a great motivational driver and can encourage autonomy in learners.

8. Encouraging discovery and fostering autonomy

We learn in many different ways. We learn intentionally and through serendipity. Blended learning is particularly suitable for encouraging learner discovery. By surfing the net, by meandering from one page to another, by jumping from one activity to another, by choosing their learning journey, by going where their fancy takes them, learners use serendipity to discover for themselves not just what they were looking for, but more importantly what they

were not expecting to find. This in turn makes them reflect on what they know and what they have learnt and then build on it. This ultimately helps them develop further.

A learner will slowly but inevitably move away from the teacher as they become a more proficient, and therefore more confident and independent learner. The best teacher–learner relationship is one that tends to fade away because that means that both teacher and learner have fulfilled their roles — the teacher by supporting their learners' needs and wishes and the learner by taking responsibility for their own learning (Holec, 1981). A blended approach, when its elements are combined effectively, helps both teacher and learner fulfil their ultimate roles.

Far from seeing their role diminished and 'replaced' somehow by technology, in blended learning the teacher plays a central role and is omnipresent throughout the learning process. Blended learning gives the teacher the opportunity to stay in communication with learners outside the classroom, thus continuing to support their learning journey. They are present in conceiving blended programmes of study that take into account learners' needs and wishes, their previous knowledge and language learning experience, their learning styles and motivations and any constraints imposed by the institution. They are present not just as teachers in the traditional sense but also as content experts, monitoring student progress, acting as mediators, as facilitators, as guides — as learner support.

The benefits to both teachers and learners are clear. But what can be the benefits of blended learning for managers or institutional administrators?

It is well-recognised that cost and resources have to be taken into account when talking of a blended approach. This is not to be underestimated if blended learning is to work. However, the initial investment in both infrastructure (e.g. hardware, software, internet access) and resources (financial, human and technical) holds numerous short- and long-term benefits for managers (in particular) and their institution (in general) by making them use resources in a more efficient and thus more cost-effective way (scalability; technology leverage). This contributes to the delivery of a better experience both for learners and for teachers/facilitators and, arguably, fulfils any institution's educational aims of helping learners to succeed by giving them the best environment in which to have the best learning experience possible.

⁴ i.e. having synchronous sessions with one or more students on an agreed day and time to clarify points raised by students.

4 benefits of a blended approach for institutions

1. Better use of resources

It is of prime importance to carefully assess the resources required to first implement and then sustain effective blended learning environments. The resources are financial, technical and human.

Developing an effective blended learning environment needs financial investment by the institution, which in the longer term is repaid many times over in terms of effectiveness and efficiency of the use of the institution's resources (Heterick & Twigg, 2003). Many institutions that have gone down that route have found this cost to be more affordable than first thought and to be found in existing budgets as it is often a question of reassessing priorities (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). Such financial investment is usually forthcoming when culture change is underway within the institution.

Developing an effective blended learning environment also needs technical resources that are both dependable and transparent to ensure that the technology can enhance the learning process, and not obstruct it. This requires the right infrastructure and having course management tools in place that have the capability of meeting the learning needs and are up-to-date, and also of having technical tools that are both reliable and easy to use (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).

Finally, a blended learning environment also needs human resources (ideally content experts working with instructional designers and media/technology experts) as these are essential to the development and delivery of appropriate blended courses. Within a blended approach, content experts (i.e. the teachers) are used in a different way: they are present in the classroom (synchronously) and also present outside the classroom, either asynchronously through the courseware, chats, forum etc. or synchronously through conferencing. They can be employed more flexibly and more cost-effectively according to learners' needs and thus support learners better.

2. Better planning

Planning for blended learning can be done gradually and cost-effectively as institutions can decide to deliver a whole language course or part of a course using the blended approach according not only to financial resources but also human and technical ones, thus moving learners from traditional classrooms to e-learning in small steps and making change easier to adapt to.

3. Scalability

With blended learning, teaching is not limited to the seating capacity of the classroom. A large number of learners can be reached, irrespective of their location and institutional department (Thanekar, 2013). This is particularly pertinent for teaching institution-wide language programmes where students come from all departments of an institution and are pressed for time. The e-learning elements of a blended approach can reach them wherever they are, and at a time to suit them. Thus, any language programme can be delivered to wide audiences with differing needs spread across different geographies, without affecting the consistency and quality of learning. Once the e-learning elements of a blended course have been designed and developed, the changes required according to learners' needs are minimal year-on-year. Therefore, not only can such language programmes can be scaled up (or down, according to the demand) without increased costs, but their delivery costs will in effect diminish.

4. Technology leverage

Today's students are technology-savvy. And today many students are equipped with a desktop or laptop (even both, sometimes) and a mobile phone. This gives us a ready opportunity to leverage for learning the technology they already have at hand for everyday personal use, and without spending surplus budget on setting up the basic infrastructure (Thanekar, 2013). Not only does it make learning an easy and interesting process, but it makes it an everyday occurrence and not something that only happens within the confines of a classroom environment, because, as we well know, learning does happen all the time, anywhere and anytime.

How to adopt blended learning?

The first two sections of this paper have considered what blended learning is and why a blended approach is particularly suited to language learning. This section will consider how to put theory into practice by first considering what needs to be taken into account before adopting a blended approach, and then by giving a few key examples of how blended learning is used worldwide.

5 important considerations before adopting a blended approach

1. Teacher training

The first consideration (and perhaps the most important one) is that teacher training is required. This will help with choosing an appropriate blend. When the classroom and online environment are used appropriately and effectively in a blended approach, this puts the learner de facto at the centre of the learning process. Teachers must be trained to develop programmes of study that take into account both the strong and weak points of each environment. This means that teachers must learn that every single input does not necessarily happen in the classroom — actually, this would be the exception rather than the rule.

Teachers should also be aware that:

- People learn better when they can choose their path of study, as this is a great motivator.
- Listening is a key part of teaching and that listening happens best in the classroom environment.
- Taking more and more of a back seat in the classroom environment is testament not only to their learners taking charge of their own learning but also to the fact that they, the teachers, have developed a blend

which is appropriate to the learners and which is helping them become effective communicators.

- Preparation time is front loaded: most preparation is needed when leading up to the course, together with supporting learners at the beginning of the course.
- A blended approach represents a significant departure from a traditional approach. It represents a fundamental reconceptualisation and reorganisation of the teaching and learning dynamic. In this respect, no two blended learning designs are identical (Graham, 2004).

2. Choosing an appropriate blend

The success of any blended learning course is largely in the blend. People tend to ask how much of the course should be online and how much of the course should be in the classroom. This is a fair question. But only teachers can answer such a question, as the answer lies (as always) in the needs and wishes of learners, the type of assessment requested by the institution and the institution's constraints, whether they be time allocation for a course, availability of human resources, physical/geographical conditions, etc. A golden rule in developing any blended course (and indeed, learning courses in general) is to always start with the end in mind, i.e. the aims and objectives of the course, taking into account the institution's constraints.

When devising a blended course, an important question that we must ask ourselves as teachers is how much time should be spent ideally in the classroom. Then it follows how much time will be spent online. Class contact time is usually dictated by the institution and is not therefore a moveable feast. However, online contact time can be as much or as little as necessary and is to a large extent decided by learners themselves. The particular blend will be dictated by looking



at the language proficiency of our learners together with the language content and skills they must develop during their course (in order to reach the level requested by the course or needed by them). In other words, this will dictate what is best done online and should be done online, as well as what is best done in the classroom and should be done in the classroom, and therefore the number of hours to be spent in the respective environments.

Our priorities as teachers must always be to focus on the 'output' (learners' own production of the second language). But for 'output' to happen, learners usually need 'input' (watching videos, listening to audio, reading texts, being familiarised with authentic language, explanation of key language and concepts, etc.). We know that the 'output' (to a large extent, spoken output) is what all learners need and want. We also know that the (spoken) output usually happens within the social environment of the classroom. So teachers must maximise the time given to output in the classroom environment without minimising the time given to input (such as grammar explanation or clarification, pronunciation practice, etc.) in the classroom, because teachers know that the better the input, the better the output.

The beauty of any blended learning course is that the blend can be developed, adapted, changed, tweaked or refined at will, or — more precisely — whenever the paramount needs of the learners demand it. Choosing the right blend is a key part of the teacher's role.

Teachers must use the flexibility that blended learning grants them to design the course that best fits learners' needs and wishes whilst taking into account assessment requirements and institutional constraints.

3. Costs

The costs involved in blended learning must be considered as they might not be negligible, especially at the beginning of the process. Cost effectiveness is a third major goal for blended learning systems. It is undeniable that these provide an opportunity for reaching a large, globally dispersed audience in a short period of time with consistent, semi-personal content delivery. There has been research undertaken in the corporate sector that shows that blended learning which is used effectively provides a large return on investment (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

However, containing costs requires a fundamental shift in thinking. Rather than focus on how to provide more effective and efficient teaching, we must focus on how to produce more effective and efficient student learning. Once learning becomes the central focus, the important question is how best to use all available resources — teacher time and technology — to achieve certain learning objectives. Using all available resources in the most efficient way leads to reduced cost and improvement in student learning (Twigg, 2006).

4. Attrition and motivation

An important element to consider when adopting a blended approach is student attrition and retention. Many students, when they are first introduced to e-learning, tend to say that they are not 'being taught' and feel that not only have they been wasting their time but that teachers are not doing their job. There are two critical elements at play here: academic factors such as difficulty and/or relevance with course material and non-academic factors such as time pressure (Picciano, 2006). In relation to non-academic factors, blended learning (especially the online element) can address two of them: time pressure (in relation to when to learn) and space (where to learn). As for the academic factors, experience has shown that well-designed blended courses enhance student learning and increase student retention (Amaral & Shank, 2010).

Furthermore, any blended course requires self-discipline and motivation on the part of the learners. Researchers in China, for example, mention the challenge that many of their students have in regulating their own learning. Having been used to receiving classroom instruction using typical drill-and-practice models, the students tend to overly rely on the requirements and demands of teachers (Huang & Zhou, 2005). They tend to follow guidance from their teachers, and do not take responsibility for their learning. However, one factor encouraging motivation in blended learning is reliance on discovery learning and self-directed learning, the type of skill base that is often lacking among such students (Huang & Zhou, 2003).

Over-reliance on teacher guidance and instruction is not the preserve of Chinese students. It exists everywhere and is most prominent amongst students used to being taught, to receiving instructions, to learning for exams. These students tend to be less motivated than those being actively engaged in their learning, having an enquiring mind and trying to find answers to their questions.

Another important factor regarding motivation is a cultural shift from teaching to learning, from being taught to learning on one's own with guidance (Prensky, 2007), which

needs to take place when a blended course is adopted. This changing paradigm means that not only must the course aims and learning objectives be made transparent and meaningful to students, but also that students themselves must take more responsibility for their learning. Being more in control of one's learning is a great motivational driver.

And finally in terms of motivational drivers, one should perhaps also look at local and cultural adaptation. One of the strengths of e-learning is the ability to rapidly distribute uniform learning materials. Yet there is often a need to customise the materials for a local audience to make them culturally relevant and locally meaningful, thus increasing motivation. By striking a balance between global and local interests and using the face-to-face classroom interaction, teachers can play an important role in helping to make globally distributed materials locally and culturally relevant and meaningful (Jagannathan, 2004).

5. Peer support

Peer support is an integral part of a blended approach, as teachers cannot be on hand to help learners all the time. Peer support is relevant in any learning environment, but it is even more relevant in a blended approach because blended learning facilitates peer support. It is easier to ask one's peers a question online than in the classroom, whether for lack of time or fear of appearing stupid. Peer support fills gaps in other students' knowledge or understanding. It also encourages the sharing of ideas about how to learn. Helping and supporting peers (for example, those who missed sessions or were having difficulty understanding key concepts etc.) is a great motivator (Hughes, 2007).

Another benefit of peer support is that students who answer their peers' questions develop not only their communication skills by using the language appropriately to explain (say) key concepts, but also their social skills by using that language effectively. And finally, thanks to peer support, teachers find that they are not overwhelmed by individual requests for help and that when these do arise, they have the time to respond promptly.

Concluding remarks

Blended learning is an approach which takes into account different learning styles and combines different learning environments in a flexible, integrated and complementary way in order to help, support and enhance learners' diverse needs and provide a successful, efficient and enjoyable learning experience. Mixing different media, different modes of delivery and different instructional strategies is not a new approach, but the capabilities of today's technology can make a blended approach both easier and more meaningful for learners. Blended learning puts learners at the centre of the learning process, encouraging them to be more independent, and also helps teachers in their vital role of supporting learning.

Blended learning — if appropriately conceived, developed and delivered — can support any number of learners, anywhere and anytime; it can help managers use human and other resources in the most efficient way possible to give learners the best learning experience possible. It is satisfying to know that there is a growing body of evidence to support the view that blended learning can result in a better student learning experience, an improvement in learning outcomes, and greater student motivation, confidence and satisfaction, leading to learners becoming more independent learners and enjoying learning the language.

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Putting theory into practice: 5 case studies

	CULP	CTJ	CCA	LAUREATE	CEUTEC
LANGUAGE STUDIED	Various	English	English	English	English
COURSE FOCUS	4 skills: Listening, Reading, Speaking, (writing)	Speaking	Listening, Reading, Speaking	General communicative proficiency at CEFR B1 level	General communicative proficiency
BROADER CONTEXT	University students and staff	Students	Adult students	Students, staff and alumni throughout the university network	Working adults
TYPE OF BLEND	Using the blend according to learners' needs	Using the blend alternatively	Using the blend for preparation	Using the blend to respond to institutions' constraints	Using the blend for communication
% FACE-TO-FACE	70% (at CEFR A1/A2 level); 30% (at CEFR B2/C1 level)	50%	Classroom activities	Approximately 10–20%	60%
% ONLINE	30% (at CEFR A1/A2 level); 70% (at CEFR B2/C1 level)	50%	Online used for preparation	Approximately 80–90%	40%

Case studies:

More detail

CULP: Using the blend according to learners' needs

In 2000 the University of Cambridge Language Centre launched a new programme called Cambridge University Language Programme (CULP: see <http://www.langcen.cam.ac.uk/culp/culp.php?c=10>) whose specification was that it was delivered 30% online and 70% face-to-face. Its other specificity was that the online material was developed in-house and conceived in such a way that it put learners firmly at the centre, concentrating on developing listening and reading skills whilst at the same time helping learners with speaking (and writing) skills by offering preparatory activities that helped learners 'perform' in the classroom. As learners' needs became better identified, the delivery of the programme became more flexible. The 30% online–70% face-to-face split of the first years was kept for lower levels (corresponding to CEFR A1/A2), but then the split slowly changed to 70% online and 30% face-to-face for higher levels (CEFR B2/C1). By B2/C1 the onus of learning was put on learners by (i) negotiating the programme with them⁵, (ii) letting them make suggestions that corresponded better to their wishes/needs and (iii) making sure that most bi-monthly classes be learner-led by having learners presenting a topic of their choice to their peers. This not only made sense in terms

of resources (i.e. using teacher resource where it was most needed) but helped learners gradually 'fly the nest' of the classroom environment as they became more proficient. This resulted in learners becoming more confident in their language and more satisfied and independent in their learning whilst at the same time having the safety net of not only the online support (material, website, chat-room etc.) but also the bi-monthly classroom environment where they could come and produce their own language and get the feedback, advice and/or support needed from the teacher and their peers.

Every year, student feedback is positive about this form of delivery and most make the comments that having the online element allowed them to catch up (if they had been ill or away on field or research trips), to better prepare for the face-to-face classroom interaction and to revise more efficiently for the end-of-year examinations.

Casa Thomas Jefferson, Brazil: Using the blend alternatively

In the Casa Thomas Jefferson School in Brazil, the main focus of the English programme is to develop students' speaking skills in class. So the teacher has devised a 50%–50% blend where students alternate between lessons done in the classroom and those done online at home. The teacher chooses which lessons they want students to focus on in class and which lessons they want students to focus on at home (online) — for example, the grammar lessons are usually done in class and the skills lessons (such as reading skills) are done online.

They meet for 2 hours and 30 minutes every other week and during that time they focus mainly on conversation and also when the need arises, they recycle some of the main content from the online lessons. This particular blend not only gives students the support needed through recycling online content but more importantly allows them to use their class time to focus on conversation, giving them the chance to work fully on practising their speaking skills. The face-to-face social environment of the classroom becomes more meaningful due to its communicative and student-centred approach.

⁵ CULP caters for students across the university. At that level learners' interests may differ quite dramatically as some would want more 'cultural/literacy' input and others would want topics more focussed on their main area of study (e.g. economics, law, natural sciences etc.).

Centro Colombo Americano, Bogota: Using the blend for preparation

In Centro Colombo Americano (a centre for adult learners), Bogota, students must invest time and dedication to learn outside the classroom — this is pivotal in their language learning. So the Adult English Program has been devised in such a way that students prepare online before their classroom lesson. For example, they may do the initial reading activity, or learn the vocabulary online.

For the Centro Colombo Americano teachers, getting students to do preparatory work at home is essential because it saves time in the classroom. It helps learners be better prepared to engage in classroom activities. It also helps them reflect constantly on their work, assessing themselves. Furthermore, the online allows students to learn in more self-paced, self-regulated ways, thus empowering them and making them more independent learners.

Laureate: Using the blend to respond to institutions' constraints

The Laureate English Program (LEP) which started in 2007 had for its objective to provide all students with an opportunity to reach a 'sufficient' level of English language proficiency while attending a Laureate institution. This 'sufficient level' is identified as B1 (threshold or intermediate level) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards (Johnson & Marsh, 2013).

However, in order to reach the B1 target, it is generally understood that about 400 hours of guided instruction is recommended as a minimum and most Laureate programs could only allow for an average maximum of 50–60 hours of face-to-face teaching over the course of an academic period. As a result, Laureate institutions adopted a blended learning solution aiming to address the issues of time and resource limitations by providing online, out-of-class access to the language programme for about 80% to 90% of the course time (Johnson & Marsh, 2013).

CEUTEC, Honduras: Using the blend for communication

CEUTEC, part of the Laureate University Network, offers Touchstone⁶ to working adults. Their priority is to use class time for communicative practice. So teachers have devised a programme where students spend about 40% of time online and have 60% contact time per week in the classroom.

Students work on a specific lesson before coming to the face-to-face classroom session. Teachers prepare their face-to-face classes to include activities that consolidate what students have practised with online, providing students with the opportunity of using what they have learned in a meaningful, communicative way.

This type of blended learning approach works for CEUTEC. By preparing online and practising in class what they have learnt online, thus maximising their practice opportunities, students have become more autonomous and in charge of their own learning. Most of the face-to-face time is devoted to practising language in a meaningful, dynamic, student-centred and communicative way.

Research into blended learning of the learner and the learning experience and the teacher and the teaching experience undertaken by Johnson and Marsh (2013) in relation to the rolling out of the Laureate English Program above concluded (unsurprisingly) that blended learning increases student efficacy for learning and allows for maximum effective use of classroom time.

⁶ A four-level, fully-flexible blended English language course published by Cambridge University Press.

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