A BLENDED LEARNING MODEL FOR TEACHING READING IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe a blended learning model to be used in Egyptian schools when teaching reading classes in English as a foreign language. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part outlines the Egyptian context and describes the target learners. The second part describes the suggested blended learning model, which is based on Text Manipulation software, and provides a rationale of each component of this model, followed by a discussion of some practical steps for designing a blended learning model. The third part describes the online courseware as a basic part of the model.[1]

1. Part One: Context

For this study, I drew upon my own experiences teaching English for four years at an Egyptian middle school. My typical students were between 13 and 15 years old and started studying English at the age of 10. The community consisted of monolingual Arabic speakers, so the English language was not used outside the classroom. The classes were made up of between 30 and 40 students, and the pedagogical approach at this school could be described as very controlled and teacher-centered. Although there was a computer cluster at the school, the only visual resource available to me was the traditional blackboard and chalk. There were a variety of reasons for this seeming marginalization of the computer facilities, perhaps the most important being that the teachers did not know how to use computers in teaching, partly because they were not prepared to do so. Another important reason was the bureaucracy; it was very difficult to get this cluster opened, on the one hand because the administration did not believe the computers were useful, and on the other because administrators feared any damage to the computers might cost the administrator his position.

English was a compulsory subject in this particular school. Most, if not all, of the students seemed unmotivated to study English. Their primary reason for studying English was to pass an exam. The exam assessed only two skills: reading and writing. For this reason, all

[1] The online courseware is posted on the blog platform<http://islamkarkour.blogspot.com/>.

the teachers used the class time to promote these skills, using traditional teaching methods such as grammar and translation exercises. However, the students' level of reading English was very low. They found reading very boring and could not complete the reading of a whole paragraph, which greatly hampered their progress.

The great majority of the students had computers at home, and those who did not utilized the computers at cybercafés, which are widespread in Egypt. In addition, students often asked about the computer cluster and queried why it was not used, so I surmised that they were eager to use computers. Accordingly, I think one of the best ways to enhance classroom learning and to change their negative perception of English may be by using computer applications. These may be best introduced to the students through blended learning – combining computer-mediated activities that students do on their own time and at their own pace with more traditional classroom instruction in which students and teachers interact in person on a fixed schedule.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to focus on how to develop students' reading skills by blending face-to-face learning with online learning.

2. Part Two: Response

One of the suggested solutions to the problem of teaching a foreign language to adult learners is Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). According to Driscoll (2002), blended learning is a suitable way to transition gradually, in small steps, from the traditional classroom teaching style to e-learning. I argue that blended learning may be the starting point for integrating CALL in the Egyptian context. To this end, I focus on how to introduce Text Manipulation (TM) as a CALL application in a blended learning environment. This may be broken down into three questions:

- What are blended learning and TM?
- Why use both in teaching reading?
- How should teachers introduce this model to the students?

2.1. The rationale behind blended learning

There is no fixed definition of blended learning (Driscoll, 2002, p.1). However, a simple definition of blended learning we may consider as a starting point for further discussion is "the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, p.96). Blended learning integrates "the strengths of synchronous (face-to-face) and asynchronous (text-based Internet) learning

activities" (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, p.96). Another, more general, definition of blended learning is "the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning" (Procter, 2003, cited in Heinze & Procter, 2004). Taken together, these definitions emphasize the strength and effectiveness of combining two different forms of learning.

These definitions are broad and not strongly related to language learning; so another definition by Leakey and Ranchoux(2006) may be more appropriate in the context of this discussion. They define blended learning in CALL as "the adaptation in a local context of previous CALL and non-CALL pedagogies into an integrated program of language teaching and learning drawing on different mixes of media and delivery to produce an optimum mix that addresses the unique needs and demands of that context" (Leakey and Ranchoux, 2006, p.358). This definition may be most appropriate for the Egyptian context because it deals with blending non-CALL, as in Egypt, and CALL environments.

As discussed above, blended learning involves combining an online CALL application, such as Text Manipulation (TM), with face-to-face instruction. Sagarra and Zapata (2008) believe that language courses that combine face–to-face instruction and CALL applications could promote language learning, and they discuss some studies that assert this claim (e.g. Ayres, 2002; Felix, 2001).

In addition, blending CALL with face-to-face instruction promotes students empowerment, which means that students actively engage with the materials. This engagement with interactive programs could decrease the negative associations with language learning because students do more than just passively receive information (Sagarra and Zapata, 2008). Moreover, blending CALL with face-to-face instruction could help students to feel more comfortable with the target language and technology and so enhance students' positive attitudes and motivation to the target language (Sagarra and Zapata, 2008; Felix, 2001). Additionally, blended learning is thought to be an efficient and effective means of conveying instructional material (Singh, 2003).

CALL currently has no place in the educational context in Egypt. The introduction of blended learning may form the first step in changing the traditional classes (Driscoll, 2002), and this approach may help promote the gradual introduction of online learning applications to Egyptian schools.

2.2. Text Manipulation (TM) in foreign language reading

Just like blended learning, TM means different things to different people (Hewer, 1997). Davies et al. (2011) define TM as follows:

> Text manipulation is the name given to software in which the student has to reconstruct a text that has been 'manipulated' in a number of different ways, e.g.
>
> - gap-filling - including cloze procedure
> - replacing existing words with other suitable words
> - re-ordering jumbled words, sentences and paragraphs
> - decoding and unscrambling words or chunks of text
> - partial or total text reconstruction – so-called total cloze

This definition may be comprehensive because it covers all that TM software can do in teaching reading.

In the following section, I narrow the focus to one particular technique of computer applications, namely Text Reconstruction, suggest some ways in which this technique can be used inside the classroom to help students to develop their reading skills, and consider the strategies students employ during text reconstruction tasks.

Before discussing how to apply text reconstruction to improve reading skills, let us consider the concept of reading *per se*. It can be claimed that there are two perspectives of reading. The first of these is the traditional perspective, which treats reading as a 'receptive' and 'passive' process. Although this perspective does not exist anymore in Western educational contexts, it obviously holds a strong place in the context of Egyptian classrooms, where the students' role is to receive information in a passive way.

The second perspective treats reading as an interactive process. According to Silberstein (1994), this modern perspective was based on Goodman (1976) and Smith's (1971) psycholinguistic theory of reading. This perspective assumes that the reader develops expectations based on his or her previous knowledge and experiences, and the text's role is to confirm or refute these expectations. In addition, Grabe (1988) argued that the reading process is not just about receiving information from the text, it is a process in which "the reading activates a range of knowledge in the reader's mind that he or she uses, and that, in turn, may be refined and extended by the new information supplied by the text" (p. 56). Elaborating on this view, Silberstein (1994) defined reading as "a complex information processing skill in which the reader interacts with text in order to (re) create meaningful discourse"(p. 12).

Interestingly, Hedge (2000) interpreted the key term 'interaction' in two different ways. The first of these involves an active relationship between the reader and the text by

which the reader tries to get the writer's message. This active process to extract the meaning from the text is called a psycholinguistic guessing game (Goodman, 1967).

Nuttall (2005) has described this kind of interaction between the reader and the text as a co-operative relationship, in which both writer and reader depend on each other; this relationship is based on unspoken rules and assumptions. Regarding the reader, these assumptions are as follows:

- The reader and the writer are using the same code.
- The writer has a message.
- The writer wants the reader to understand the message (p11).
- Of course, the assumptions are the same for the writer.

This type of interaction is viewed as a "conversation" between the reader and the writer (ibid) or "a dialogue between the reader and the text" (Grabe, 1988, p. 56).

Hedge's second interpretation of 'interaction' is the interplay between six different kinds of knowledge the reader has. These six types of knowledge can be categorized into two main categories:

- *Systemic knowledge* helps the reader to decode the language. This includes syntactic and morphological knowledge.
- *Schematic knowledge* helps the reader to interpret the text's meaning. This involves general world, sociocultural, topic and genre knowledge.

2.3. Text Reconstruction and reading as an interactive process

A good way to try to develop learners' reading skills is to apply the principle of interaction. Therefore, I think that the text reconstruction technique not only gives the learners the chance to interact with the text, but also makes the reader, partially, play the role of the writer. In this view, the reader participates in writing the text, and this is the maximum degree of participation. In text reconstruction, "readers have no choice but to interact if they want to play; passive meaning-extraction is not an option" (Cobb & Stevens, 1996).

There are many forms of task manipulation reconstruction. All of these forms guarantee that the reader will participate in forming the text whether by filling gaps, reordering sentences to form a text, or guessing words based on activating his schema by a title, photo or short video. To understand how text reconstruction can help in developing reading skills, two main categories of reading skills must be distinguished:

- *Top-down processing skills* are defined as "the application of prior knowledge to working on the meaning of a text" (Hedge, 2000.p189), i.e. schematic knowledge;
- *Bottom-up processing skills* are "the decoding of the letters, words and other language features in the text" (ibid. p189). At this level the reader uses his or her systemic knowledge to decode the letters, words and sentences to grasp the meaning.

Using the text reconstruction technique can help students to develop the two above-mentioned kinds of processing skills. Davis (1988, p. 36) argued that the text reconstruction program can help students not only to apply their "knowledge of grammar and vocabulary" (bottom-up processing skills), but also to exercise their "common sense and general knowledge" (top-down processing skills).

In addition, the rationale for using text reconstruction to improve students' reading skills has been summarized by Brett (1994) in two points:

- Learners are provided with a motivating and unique linguistic problem-solving task, which involves and engages them with authentic texts;
- It also activates a large amount of both implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge (p. 332).

When trying to answer the question of what happens during text reconstruction, Davis (1988) claimed that the most important advantage of text reconstruction programs is that "they encourage students to work out their own learning strategies" (p. 37). In this section, I explore the learning strategies employed by students during text reconstruction tasks.

Although there are many studies that focus on strategies employed during text reconstruction tasks (e.g., Trippen, Legenhausen & Wolf, 1988; Legenhausen & Wolf, 1990; Cobb & Stevens, 1996), I will focus on a comprehensive and detailed study conducted by Edmondson, Reck and Schrode (1988). These researchers tried to determine the types of strategies used by students when using text reconstruction software. They used two text reconstruction programs, namely STORYBOARD and SHUFFLER, in which a group of unstructured sentences (and words within these sentences) appear on the screen, and the task was to organize the words in each sentence and structure the sentence to form a meaningful text.

Edmondson and his colleagues categorized the strategies into three groups according to level of operation: sentence-internal (level one), internal shuffling (level two) and text shuffling (level three).

At level one, the researchers determined the following sentence-internal strategies which students used to reorder words or sentence fragments to form an intelligible sentence:

- The Noun Phrase construction strategy consisted of moving "determiners or adjectives to the head of a noun" (p. 200). I have noticed that the same strategy was employed in a PINPOINT task where the students first write a lot of determiners and adjectives (e.g. the, a, an, etc.).
- The adverbial phrase construction strategy consisted of students ordering words to form a sentence by building an adverbial phrase. For example, one of their sentences was, "A few grunted put it back and times he" (p. 201). The student's first move is to combine "A few" with "times" to form the adverbial phrase "A few times."
- The subject-fronting strategy consisted of students first trying to choose a word that could be the subject of the sentence.
- The kernel-sentence building strategy consisted of students trying to put the words into the simple sentence order (i.e., subject-verb-object).
- The report-fronting strategy consisted of students putting the reporting verbs at the front.

At level two, internal shuffling sentence selection, researchers observed which sentence structure students selected at each level and why they selected these. Some of the strategies used at this level included:

- The frontal attack strategy begins with the whole text appearing unordered on the screen. Students start with the first available sentence, they do not skip one to start with another; they reconstruct the first sentence they see on the screen.
- The easy-ones-first strategy entails students starting with the most possible meaning shuffled sentences.
- The direct speech selection strategy entails students' selection of direct speech marks and associated commas.
- The shortest-first strategy applies when students start with the shortest sentence.

At level three, text-shuffling strategies, subjects attempted to put the shuffled sentences in the right order. Some of these strategies include those outlined below.

- The find the close strategy involved students trying to start with a sentence that "sets the scene" or "provides the frame for the actions" (p. 208).
- The build it up from the beginning strategy applied when students tried every sentence to start the text with, and if this sentence was not meaningful in the initial place the student would try the next one to start with, and so on.

Although Edmondson et al. claimed that their study was based on "a richer data base" (p. 193) therefore more comprehensive than that of Trippen, Legenhausen and Wolf (1988), I think that they did not pay sufficient attention to the schematic knowledge strategies (top-down skills), and their main focus was on the systemic knowledge strategies. Legenhausen and Wolf (1990, p. 4) recognized this limitation in their second group of strategies, which they labeled "text-dependent," and in which "already reconstructed text elements stimulate the (re)activation of linguistic and world knowledge" (p. 4).

In conclusion, I think that both studies together form a good framework that could help educators to understand what happens during text reconstruction.

2.4. Text Manipulation in a blended learning design

Perhaps one of the most important reasons for suggesting the use of TM to teach reading in the Egyptian context is that TM programs can foster and catalyze the concept of interactive reading which is totally missing in English language instruction in Egyptian schools. Cobb and Stevens (1996) stated that "text manipulation externalizes the otherwise invisible reader-

text interaction and gives the reader supported practice" they added that by using TM "Readers have no choice but to interact if they want to play; passive meaning-extraction is not an option." Moreover, in a separate review of the Hot Potatoes program - one of the TM programs - Winke and MacGregor (2001) claimed that this program "increases the amount of exposure to and potential interaction with the target language" (Winke & MacGregor, 2001, p. 31).

Another important advantage of TM programs is that these programs may motivate students toward not only reading but also all language skills. Hewer (1997) also claimed that TM activities "motivate and promote lasting language learning" (Hewer, 1997, p. 2). In his reflection on using text reconstruction programs, Brett (1994) stated that "learners are interested, challenged, and motivated by the task, and keen to complete it once started" (Brett, 1994, p. 313).

There are different ways to present TM manipulation activities; the suggested one here is to use it in a form of blended learning model. However, there is no fixed template for a blended learning model and the design could differ from one place to other. According to some authors, there are as many blended learning models as there are organizational challenges (e.g., Reid-Young, 2003; Banados, 2006). In addition, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) claimed, "No two blended learning designs are identical" (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, p.97). That may mean that every context could have its unique design according to the challenges, the settings and students' needs. The suggested model for the Egyptian context combines the following:

1. Reading a text in the class
2. Doing TM at home about the same topic
3. Posting on a forum and using chat
4. Coming back to the class to complete a discussion about the text and the tasks they done at home

The model is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

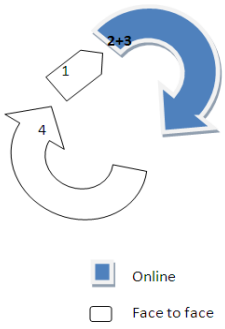

Figure 1. The blended learning model.

The model works as a cycle, which starts in the class (face-to-face), followed by online homework, and ends in the class again.

1. Reading a text in the class

The starting point of the model is reading in the class. Students will start the blended learning cycle by reading a text in the class from the course book. This may be necessary to help students manage the second two steps. Students may find TM tasks difficult if they have not read about the same topic before doing the task. Reading the text in the class may catalyze and foster students' schema about the topic. Besides, it may motivate students if they know that they are going to do an online homework task about the topic they are reading in the class and so make them more interested in reading the text (Sagarra & Zapata, 2008). Besides, reading the text in the class cannot be avoided because it is the institutional expectation that students do so.

2. Doing TM at home about the same topic

This is the first step in combining face-to-face and online learning. Students will start doing TM activities at home as homework for many reasons. First, as Sagarra and Zapata (2008) claim, doing homework online enhances students' positive attitudes to the target language and this may be important in a context where students' attitudes and motivation toward learning English may be not positive enough. Second, it gives students the opportunity to improve their autonomous skills because TM activities give them some control over their learning pace and allows them to try over and over through the immediate feedback without fear of embarrassment since there will be no-one watching them. According to Benson (2001), text reconstruction games, an application of TM activities, can foster students' autonomy because it gives students "Control over path taken" (Benson 2001, cited in Blin,

2004, p. 381). The importance of developing students' autonomy lies not only in developing students' individual autonomy but also "the development of a social, and even political autonomy through which a group of learners will collectively take responsibility for and control of their learning" (Blin, 2004, p. 378). In addition, giving students the opportunity to engage with the materials outside the classroom could "save time and increase students' learning" (Cole & Foster, 2008, p. 2).

3. Posting at the forum and using chat

After completing the TM tasks students are required to "copy" what they have reconstructed and "paste" it in a forum space and write their own reflections on the differences or the common points between the text they just constructed and the text they read in the class. They are also required to post in the forum a list of the new vocabulary. The teacher may divide students into discussion groups in which their task is to engage in a collaborative discussion group to do the forum task; in other words, students will do the task individually and go to the forum to paste the text they have just made and to meet their group to do the forum task, which involves:

- Reflection about the task
- Determining differences or the common points between the text they just constructed and the text they read in the class
- Posting the new or the difficult vocabulary

The teacher can evaluate the task through this forum and may engage with the students to encourage discussion.

4. Coming back to the class to complete a discussion about the text and the tasks they done at home

The last stage in this cycle is when students come back to the class. The teacher may devote the first 10 minutes in the class to giving them feedback based on what he saw in the forum and start a discussion about the new or the difficult vocabulary, and the differences or the common points between the text they read in the class and the reconstructed text online.

Blended Learning Checklist

In addition, Sutton (2004) sets out some practical steps to be used with any blended learning program. Some of these steps may be used as a checklist with any design. However, it was used for this design as follows:

1. Clearly define your desired learning outcomes

To design an effective blended learning model, the desired learning outcomes should be determined. According to Hewer (1997), the desired learning outcomes of this model are:

- Introducing CALL applications to the Egyptian context gradually
- Enhancing students' autonomy through doing the TM tasks individually
- Fostering cooperative work, which is totally new in this context, by initiating online group discussion through the use of forum and chat
- Increasing students' positive attitudes and motivation to learn English as a foreign language
- Increasing text-students and students-students interaction
- Increasing students' knowledge of structure, form and collocation and improving their vocabulary through doing the TM tasks

2. **Be clear about the learning culture of your organization**

The culture of the institution has been taken in consideration regarding the necessity of reading in the class, choosing the TM texts related to the course book, and avoiding the bureaucracy by not depending on the school computers because students will do the online tasks in their homes.

3. **Select the delivery mechanisms**

Blogs are the preferred sites for doing TM activities.

4. **Adopt a holistic approach to design and development**

Under this point Sutton states, "Connections between classroom training, coaching and e-learning content will lead to a strong solution" (Sutton, 2004). This connection may be found in the third and the fourth steps of the model where the students start posting and discussing the task online, and then complete this discussion face-to-face with the teacher and the whole class in the classroom.

5. **Design program assessment to reflect the desired outcomes of the program**

The blended learning blog could be assessed through students' posts in the comment box and by considering to what extent students are engaged and interact with the TM tasks as well as through the discussion in the classroom about the task and their posting in the forum.

3. Part Three: Description of the courseware exemplar

I have examined and discussed courseware for TM on my personal blog (http://islamkarkour.blogspot.com/p/pyramids.html). Here, I break this topic down into three different levels of text reconstruction: words in a sentence, sentences in a paragraph, short paragraphs in an essay. All these levels of text reconstruction are thought to achieve the

different levels of interaction: interpretive, cognitive and linguistic. Also, students need to blend reading and writing skills to work through these activities.

Cobb and Stevens (1996) stated that good expectations play an important role in reading. Based on Goodman's model of reading, which is that reading is "a psycholinguistic game," the design of all tasks took into consideration the role of expectations in reading by using videos or images in order to activate students' schema, help them to develop some expectations before reading, and read to test these expectations.

All of the TM activities will be visible to the students one by one after they read the parallel topic in the class. All topics are combined with chat and forum where the student has to copy the text they manipulated and paste it in the forum to reflect on it and answer a few questions about commonalities and differences between the text they manipulated and the text they read in the class. Also they are required to start writing the difficult or the new vocabulary as shown in Figure 2.

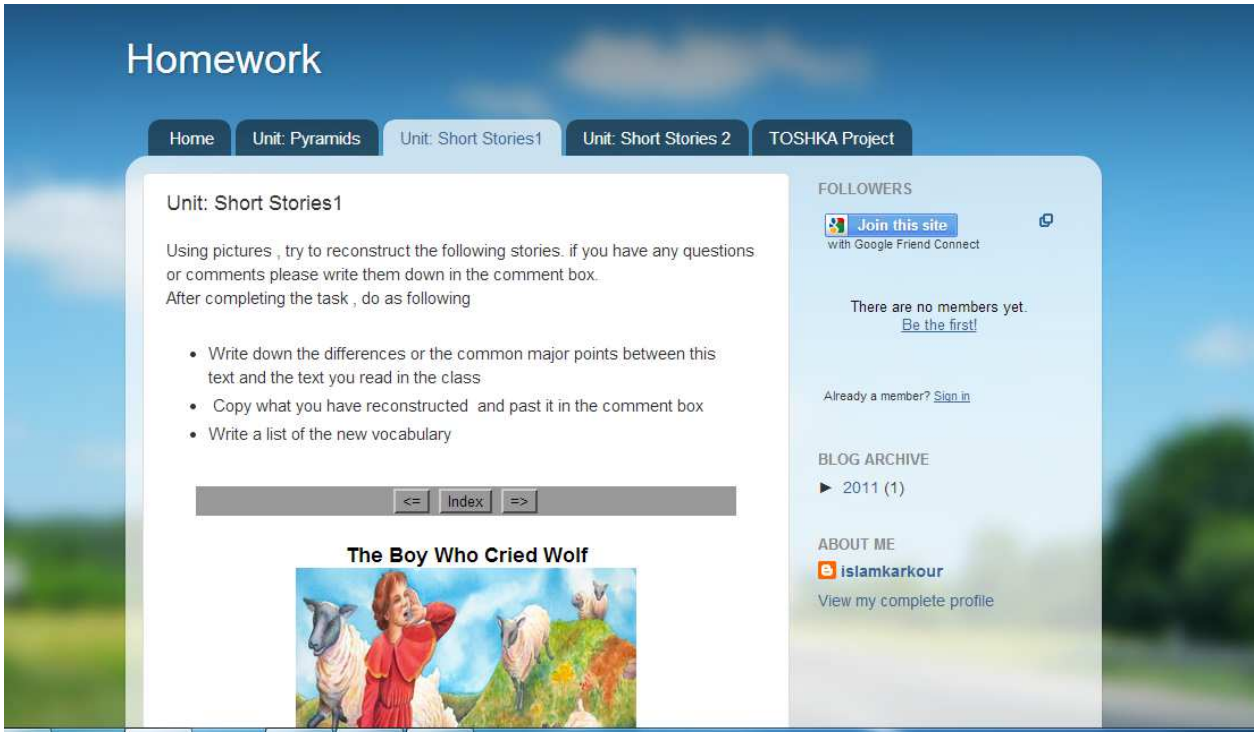

Figure 2. A sample text reconstruction activity.

Topic One (Words in a sentence level)

The first topic, "The Great Pyramid" (http://islamkarkour.blogspot.com/p/pyramids.html) was designed by Hot Potatoes software. It consists of separate sentences which are in the right

and normal order but with words in each sentence which are not in the right order. Students' task is to reorder words in each sentence. By the end of the activity students will construct a whole paragraph. In addition, each sentence is preceded by a picture to activate students' schema and form a base of guessing or expectations as recommended in the cognitive and the psycholinguistic models of reading (Cobb & Stevens, 1996; Goodman 1967).

Topics Two and Three (Sentences in a paragraph level)

The third topic, "Short Stories"(http://islamkarkour.blogspot.com/p/unit-short-stories.html) was designed by WebSequitur and consists of some short stories. The sentences of each short story are not organized, but each story is preceded by a title and an image that reveals a lot about the story. The students' task is to organize these sentences to form the story. The students do not see unorganized sentences, rather, they see dashes or blobs, and their task is to guess and restore the story using the images and their memory of the third topic as stimulus.

Topic Four (Sentences in a paragraph level)

Topic four, "TOSHKA Project" (http://islamkarkour.blogspot.com/p/blog-page.html) is the same of the third topic in terms of software used and students' task. The only difference in the kind of stimulus is instead of an image a video was used to activate students' schema and increase their motivation. In addition, students will blend an additional skill to writing and reading, which is listening. They will watch the video and listen to the audio in order to re-order the unorganized written summary of this video.

4. Conclusion

In reviewing the literature discussed above, this paper argues that TM activities and blended learning are useful and effective ways to teach reading in a foreign language classroom. Unfortunately, after designing the TM activities and blended learning model described in this paper, there was no opportunity to test this assumption inside a language classroom to prove or test the assumption using empirical data. Nevertheless, the activities are available online for any teacher wants to try them in his or her classroom and share the results with foreign language teaching communities.

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