

Reconceptualizing Blended Learning as a Teaching Strategy for English Language Learners¹

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Abstract

This article explores the efficacy of blended learning in English language classrooms. Many schools all over the world have decided to employ various online and blended courses in their courses, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Corporations that build learning management systems (LMS) for blended learning, as well as “boxed” curricula, have presented their materials as a means of student-centered learning, but what about those students who really need peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher interactions to further develop fluency, and cannot get enough of that interaction in a blended learning environment? Instructors should not only take a more active role in blended learning environments to make sure all students are thriving, but they should also design their own blended learning curricula or modify existing “boxed” curricula to more appropriately help their students succeed.

Resumen

Este artículo explora la eficacia del aprendizaje combinado con estudiantes de inglés. Muchas escuelas de todo el mundo han decidido emplear cursos en línea combinados con cursos presenciales, especialmente durante un período de Covid-19. Las corporaciones que crean sistemas de gestión del aprendizaje (LMS) para el aprendizaje combinado, así como los planes de estudio “prefabricados”, presentan sus materiales como un medio de aprendizaje centrado en el estudiante, pero ¿qué pasa con aquellos estudiantes que realmente necesitan compañeros e interacciones con maestros para desarrollar aún más la fluidez y no pueden obtener suficiente de esa interacción en un entorno de aprendizaje combinado? Los instructores no solo deben desempeñar un papel más activo en los entornos de aprendizaje combinado para asegurarse de que todos los estudiantes se desarrollen, sino que también deben diseñar sus propios planes de estudio combinados o modificar los currículos existentes “prefabricados” para ayudar más adecuadamente a sus estudiantes a tener éxito.

Introduction

Especially during a health emergency, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning can lay claim to the future of education, as many schools must employ some form of blended learning to continue the education process. Sahin-Kahil (2014) explains that blended learning or “blends” are a combination of “self-paced learning generally through web-based application and face-to-face classroom teaching” (p. 175). Institutions might use products from Pearson, Canvas, Summit, or another online Educational Product Vendor (EPV) in combination with face-to-face classroom interaction to create a blended learning course. These Learning Management Systems (LMS) will either come with their own “boxed” curricula, which is sold by a vendor to an institution under the guise of being effective in the classroom without modification by the instructor for the student population, or the LMS comes with additional tools instructors can add to their own tailor-made learning modules.

Educational institutions all over the world embrace blended learning, as it could have the potential to motivate students and improve efficacy in an increasingly globalized world (Tayebnik & Puteh, 2012). However, it is vitally important to the efficacy of any blended learning program that instructors understand how blended learning changes their role in the classroom. In a blended learning classroom, as opposed to a traditional classroom, instructors transition from teacher to facilitator and back. For example, a project-based course using blended learning delivery, might require an instructor to explain the projects and the concepts, but the blended delivery software is often self-paced and might require only a facilitator to troubleshoot any problems with the platform or anticipate students’ misinterpretations of the directions. Instructors tend to do far less direct instruction and far more individual tutoring or small-group workshops. Subsequently, English language learners (ELLs) are reliant upon their instructor’s ability to understand individual student’s needs. If instructors do not “buy-in” to how the blended learning classroom works, as Tayebnik and Puteh (2012) suggest, efficacy might not be possible. Furthermore, without some peer-to-peer and instructor-to-student interaction, blended learning takes on some characteristics of the grammar-translation approach to second language teaching. ELLs in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situation

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have unique learning needs that require teachers to reconsider blended learning as a teaching strategy among many other effective teaching strategies, instead of a one-size-fits-all solution.

Unlike face-to-face and distance learning, blended learning offers “the most effective and efficient combination of the two modes of learning” (Neumeier, 2005, p. 164). Blended learning, which is often discussed alongside other types of personalized learning programs, can provide students with a self-paced solution to education. Albiladi and Alshareef (2019) argue that blended learning’s unique combination of traditional classroom teaching and distance learning’s convenience provides “more learning opportunities that motivate students to participate in and outside of the class settings” (p. 232). Albiladi and Alshareef (2019) note that teachers must understand the students’ needs in their own personalized learning, properly guiding them in ways that support student learning. While experts might praise blended learning for all the motivational benefits it provides, it also comes with its share of eccentricities when compared with traditional face-to-face learning.

Benefits of Blended Learning

According to Adas and Bakir (2013), students taught using blended learning course models tended to develop better writing skills than those taking traditional face-to-face courses. In fact, in their study, students’ understanding of English mechanics and “coherence of paragraphs significantly improved” (p. 261). Similarly, while using a blended learning model, students in Shin-Kizil’s (2014) study understood writing to be the emphasis of the course, and they “perceived writing as the[ir] most improved skill” (p. 184). While this model might provide students with the flexibility of distance learning and a grounded classroom experience of face-to-face classes, blended learning does not necessarily promote significant gains in students’ listening and speaking skills in the target language (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019), as it did in their writing in the target language. McGee and Reis (2012) argue that almost no one acknowledges that blended learning emphasizes primarily the students’ use and understanding of texts, rather than an interaction with peers or instructors.

In some ways, blended learning classrooms are similar to those of flipped classrooms, in that different kinds of online resources create a unique and partially online learning space. According to Fawley (2014), interest in flipped classrooms is as a result of new educational technologies, “allow[ing] instructors to transfer a lecture into something portable that can be viewed or listened to outside of class” (p. 19). In fact, according to Bush (2013), “The principles that are involved with ‘flipping the classroom’ fit well with the concept of blended learning” (p. 61). At times, instructors in blended learning and flipped classrooms transition from a more traditional role of educator to that of an online curriculum designer and facilitator. Valiathan (2002) highlights the need for “instructor or facilitator support” in skill-driven blended learning models, arguing that instructors do not teach so much as motivate students to learn using self-paced learning software. Valiathan (2002) identifies two other blended learning models which have no specified instructor role at all, including learning through media modules only and “competency-driven learning” where objectives are met primarily through peer-to-peer mentoring. Considering that Valiathan mentions these two other blended learning models with no clear instructor role, these three blended learning models seem to be three varying stages of learning where teachers are increasingly redundant. An administrator or instructor would have to determine which model is appropriate to use, which would be dependent on the students they are serving and their educational setting. Each model has a varying degree of flexibility that could be beneficial if implemented appropriately with the students’ needs in mind.

Drawbacks of Blended Learning

McGee and Reis (2012) argue that blended courses “revert to traditional assessment modes while encouraging non-traditional instructional strategies” (p. 16). As a result, blended learning can, in some cases, be a text-centered model, focused on the implementation of particular course designs that require specific tools and resources (e.g., platforms, learning management systems). Furthermore, with three different levels of instructor-student interaction for each blended learning model, efficacy across different programs might be difficult to ascertain. As a result, a skills-driven blended learning model, with the most instructor-student interaction of the three, is similar to the grammar-translation approach of learning in that students’ focus is not on spoken communication, rather, reading and writing take a front seat (Liu & Shi, 2007). The other two models will, no doubt, focus on reading and writing skills even more.

Students do not learn the language so much as understand *how* the language works, as grammar-translation approach is the principal method of teaching dead languages such as Latin and Ancient Greek (Celce-Mercia, 1980). In a blended learning setting, students are often given modules or projects to complete with varying

degrees of instruction and personalized learning. According to Rossett et al. (2003), blended learning course designers can choose to what degree they want their course blending, but their choices might be limited to the amount of time they have to implement their programming and the general stability of the information they are trying to communicate to their audience.

Blended learning course designs for teaching English are sometimes reused from year to year, often with few changes other than basic software updates. The courses themselves, are readings with quizzes and final projects that require complex writing skills. The design itself can have peer-to-peer interaction, online discussion boards, or no student-student interaction at all. Either way, outcomes are generally measured through multiple choice assessments and written work. By design, these types of courses could be planned for the sake of student completion, rather than via learning efficacy. McGee and Reis (2012), however, explain that blended learning courses are meant to emphasize active, rather than passive, student learning. They express that despite students' different strengths, they can achieve success because, theoretically, they are in charge of their own academic success. Conversely, students who need additional scaffolding and support might be so in charge of their own learning that they self-mute (i.e., the act of purposely limiting or eliminating interactions with others in their learning community), as Harrington (2010) asserts, because they are not sure exactly what success looks like in a blended learning course.

While a traditional classroom can be overwhelming for a student who might not have a lot of confidence, a blended learning course may not necessarily be built to meet their needs either. According to Harrington (2010), blended learning environments create two very distinct communities for students (online, and face-to-face) that might intimidate ELLs to the point of "muting" (3). She argues that ELLs in a face-to-face environment might self-mute, limiting their speaking interactions out of anxiety or lack of confidence, while ELLs in online environments might feel compelled to stay quiet in online interactions because of their lack of experience with the particular software, lack of confidence, or because they misunderstand directions, which might have otherwise been addressed in a traditional classroom (Harrington, 2010). If students' interactions are split between limited class time where they are experiencing muting, and online class time where they feel muted, the course, itself, would easily be construed as ineffective for ELLs. As a result, it is imperative that blended learning courses be user-friendly to *all* users. Otherwise, blended learning course designers are not promoting the same level of educational access to all students.

Few people mention access with regard to the design and implementation of blended learning courses. While it is possible that many course designers just assume that nearly everyone has access to computers and the internet, many people do not. Harrington (2010) argues that it is vital that instructors "make certain" that ELLs in a blended learning course have access to the computers and internet required to complete the assigned work (p. 8). She acknowledges that this sounds obvious, but access to technology is not always a given for some populations, even in developed countries like the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, two-thirds of those in the United States have access to the internet, and some of those only have access through a smartphone, rather than a computer (Ryan & Lewis, 2017). Comparatively, as of 2019, 47 percent of those in developing countries have internet access (International Telecommunication Union, 2019). Harrington (2010) also argues that students need access to one-on-one conference or writing lab times, as student-led study groups might also result in muting, but providing these supports would be challenging in developing countries that lack consistent internet access

Educational Product Vendor Course Designs and the Need for Teachers

While corporations might create materials which suit the school as a whole, there is no guarantee that every student's needs will be met with "boxed" curricula. Stakeholders with policy control are trusting that these corporations know more about designing curricula and programs than teachers who are familiar with the needs of specific students.

Bonk and Graham (2006) explain that often institutions or businesses view "blended learning [as] the ability to provide 'solutions' to customers' problems, rather than just training and this requires a highly flexible approach" (p. 10). Considering that some instructors might not be as versed in developing effective blended learning programs because they lack experience with the software or do not fully understand the philosophy behind blended learning courses, it makes sense that institutions and administrators might contract companies to create curricula for them instead of asking instructors to do so. The implication here is that instructors are the "middlemen" of education. With significant changes to student populations, the growing popularity of online university programs, and the necessity of online learning in the wake of Covid-19, a luddite would argue that educators are in the perfect position to be squeezed out of education.

On the other hand, Rossett et al. (2003) argue that a blended learning environment is simply a teaching strategy that can be employed to create an effective learning environment in which the teacher continues to play an important role. Specifically, the authors highlight how the instructor designs the blend itself, as the strategy the instructor employs is to help the students achieve particular outcomes. If blended learning is just another teaching strategy to facilitate student learning, the unintended consequences of these negative reactions to instructor-made blends might contribute to the mounting pressure instructors feel to use “boxed” curricula for blended learning environments. As teachers transition to the roles of facilitators in the blended learning classroom, their training and expertise seem to have less value. Instead, the student becomes the burgeoning expert.

Lowe (2015) suggests that a student-centered approach to teaching is one where teachers stop to consider students’ learning perspectives in order to teach them more effectively. In that vein, blended learning can very easily be a student-centered approach, but it does not have to be. This is problematic because those who are teaching the blended learning courses are not necessarily the authors of the curricula. So how can blended learning become more student-centered? ELL instructors know that not all activities hit their mark. Not all assignments end in success for every student. Not all assessments are designed with every student’s needs in mind. This is why there are a whole host of strategies to help teachers help students. Subsequently, we must reconceptualize what it means to teach a blended learning course.

Recommendations & Summary

If blended learning were truly student-centered, it would have the capacity to help students with unique needs, rather than focus on helping students achieve without additional help. It is acceptable for education to involve interaction between others. Blended learning can be designed to have these components; however, we must also recognize students with unique needs. Instructors and curriculum designers must be willing to acknowledge that students are different and might require more or less help to achieve the same level of fluency as other students. This means that instructors might need to be facilitators to some students and teachers to others. Furthermore, the “boxed” curricula need to have enough flexibility to help teachers accommodate students with these needs.

Instructors must maintain an invested and active role in the blended learning classroom, as ELL students might have different needs that they might not feel comfortable voicing during class or in online forums. While classrooms that take a grammar-translation approach have some value, it is important to note that teachers of ELLs must focus on speaking and listening as well as reading and writing. In dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, Zoom, GoToMeeting, and other video conferencing software have helped bridge this gap to some extent, allowing students to participate in live classroom-like environments where they can speak and listen as well as read and write. But to create a truly student-centered approach using a blended learning strategy, one must acknowledge that a student centered approach means that ELL instructors must continue to partially shape the course to their students’ needs. This might mean having Zoom calls with breakout rooms to give ELLs different speaking and listening experiences. This might mean instructors need to reject at least some of the “boxed” curricula and build their own blended learning curricula, or modify the “boxed” curricula to better serve student needs. With blended learning, instructors can choose to be “middlemen,” providing education materials that might or might not be helpful to their students, or they can do what they have always done—shape the materials, environment, and circumstances to promote learning for *their* students.

It is important to note that modifying the “boxed” curricula can also be problematic. In some cases, modifications require permission from the curriculum author, which could take more time than the instructor has to wait. Also, if the software has periodic updates, modifications have the potential of being lost in any platform update. There is also the possibility that any modification will not be accepted or allowed. As with any traditional course, an instructor should be ready to adapt to whatever happens in and outside of the classroom. While administrators and vendors might argue that blended learning is a solution to many problems, it is really just a tool that, if not implemented effectively, creates more problems than it solves.

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