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Blended learning: A viable solution?

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<Abstract>

Over the last decade, there has been a major move towards introducing technology- and Internet-based learning into language classrooms. The reasons for this are based on such factors as cost, access, range of experience, and learner motivation. Results have been mixed, and some educators have returned full circle to traditional teacher-led classroom instruction. Between these two approaches, there has been recent interest in programmes based on *blended learning*; a system that utilises both e-learning and traditional teaching. This paper discusses the place of blended learning in the language classroom, and its implementation at Seinan Jogakuin University's Department of English. It concludes that while there are issues that need to be resolved, such a programme has the potential to enrich the students' language learning and provide increased opportunities for language growth.

Key words: blended learning, e-learning, implementation, student-centered learning

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a strong emphasis on introducing technology- and Internet-based learning into language classrooms. The rationalisations behind this come from such factors as:

- Cost: It is possible to handle instruction for larger numbers of students with less staffing and reduced time.
- Access: The material can be accessed by the students at any time, and from anywhere with Internet access.
- Range of experience: Using a variety of multimedia applications, materials can be supplied to students that help them develop such skill areas as listening, reading, pronunciation, writing, grammar, and vocabulary.
- Learner motivation: By adding multimedia elements to materials, the activities become more enticing—therefore student motivation to learn should increase.

Results have been mixed, with some programmes achieving success while many others have failed or faded away. Consequently, some educators have returned full circle to traditional teacher-led classroom instruction, believing this offers students a better learning environment and greater use of their teaching skills. However, between these two approaches a compromise solution has been developed using programmes based on *blended learning*—a system that utilises both e-learning components and traditional teacher-led, classroom-based learning. As part of our ongoing development of the Oral English programmes at Seinan Jogakuin University's Department of English, it was decided in 2010 to add a blended learning component to our first-year courses using a commercially developed system. With both the system being new and suffering some

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teething problems, and issues with its implementation into our programme, there are still some areas that need to be developed and adjusted to bring it up to the level our department requires. However, the general consensus by both faculty and students is that this programme is worth continuing and developing.

What is *blended learning*?

In the last decade, e-learning has become a major focus in the educational community. Portability, flexibility, cost efficiency, and student motivation have all been cited as factors for implementation. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in language education. Some of the biggest obstacles teachers have faced in trying to teach a new language to learners have been a lack of resources, insufficient focused study time, and the required variety of experiences needed for language competency. Integrating e-learning into a language-learning programme would appear to offer educators a chance to overcome many of these obstacles, as well as enriching their programmes.

However, in parallel with this rush to embrace these technologies has been the realisation that traditional teacher-led instruction still plays a vital role in language learning. To learn a language is such a unique path for each student that experienced human oversight is still an intrinsic part of the learning process. As Bershin (2004) states, teachers "...convey enthusiasm, expert knowledge, experience, and context." More importantly, there is the cultural effect of traditional learning—"people interact and learn from one another." Even those with a material interest in installing computers into classrooms agree. Possibly the best known is Microsoft founder Bill Gates' oft-quoted saying, "Technology is just a tool. In terms of getting the kids working together and motivating them, the teacher is the most important."

This has been the experience with e-learning from its early beginnings with computer based training in the 1970s, satellite delivery of video lessons or CD-ROMs of learning materials in the 1980s and 1990s, through to web-based training and

virtual classrooms in the last decade. No matter how effective or well constructed the material is, an 'in the flesh' learning environment still forms the core of an instructional programme.

With this realisation came the obvious next step—to incorporate facets of both systems into one classroom pedagogy, to blend traditional learning practice with an integrated programme of technology-based instruction. In other words, *blended learning*, which "seems to have arisen from a general sense of disillusionment with the stand-alone adoption of online media" (MacDonald, 2008). Definitions of blended learning vary, but as can be seen from the following sampling of statements, certain key elements are common to all.

"Blended learning is the combination of different training "media" (technologies, activities, and types of events) to create an optimum training programme for a specific audience. The term "blended" means that traditional instructor-led training is being supplemented with other electronic formats." (Bershin, 2004)

"Blended learning is a phrase introduced by the distance learning community in recognizing the value of synchronous learning activities, like face-to-face interactions with instructors and collaborative work with peers, as complements to activities performed asynchronously by individual learners" (Howard, Remenyi, & Pap, 2006)

"The term *blended learning* is used to describe a solution that combines several different delivery methods, such as collaboration software, Web-based courses, EPSS, and knowledge management practices. Blended learning also is used to describe learning that mixes various event-based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning, and self-paced learning" (Valiathan, 2002)

"The working definition, 'Blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction' reflects the idea that blended learning is the combination of instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional face-to-face learning systems and distributed

learning systems. It also emphasizes the central role of computer-based technologies in blended learning." (Graham, in Bonk and Graham, 2006)

For the purposes of this paper, the following working definition of blended learning will be used, as it reflects most closely the programme of study that the authors are currently developing at Seinan Jo Gakuin University. Blended learning, then, refers to *a programme of study that on one hand incorporates elements of traditional face-to-face classroom instruction that follows a prescribed syllabus of study, while on the other hand allows students to engage in a self-paced course of independent study utilising an online 'e-learning' framework to deliver content.*

The goals and opportunities of blended learning

With a definition of blended learning in place, it is necessary to see how such a programme can best be introduced into a course syllabus in such a way that the opportunities it creates can be maximized.

Use blended learning to maximize resources

Any programme has limited amounts of time for teachers to meet their classes, time for teachers to interact with individual students, and material and technical resources. Because the online component of a blended learning programme is predominantly self-running, it allows teachers to concentrate on other aspects of the programme, particularly those which require more human interaction. Once a system is up and running, it is able to do so with minimal moderation or oversight. What is more, the system can be modified and upgraded incrementally over time, when resources are available. The more immediate needs of classroom interaction can be dealt with first, as these have priority.

Take the best aspects of face-to-face instruction and e-learning, with no need to compromise

Class programmes that rely totally on the teacher, or conversely programmes that focus on technology for delivery have weaknesses. A teacher only has so much time, while technology has no soul, no flexibility, and no social skills. Blended learning can take the best from each system with no dilution of impact or effectiveness. It allows for more communicative activities and class time can be more productive. Study activities that take place outside the classroom take on much of the role that homework in a traditional classroom takes, but in a more enriching, complete manner.

Provide multimedia-rich content outside of the classroom to increase exposure to the target language

There is so much multimedia content available online for language students to use, and teachers have many more resources available to simply and effectively create their own content. This content is difficult to provide in the classroom, but by making it available to students as a follow on to what they have studied in class, they have greater opportunities to function within the target language. These resources might include streamed or embedded video and audio, podcasts, interactive communities, collaborative writing tools, forums, and interactive quizzes.

Increase availability of scaffolding

In addition to increased exposure and provision of rich content outside of the classroom, blended learning has more opportunities to support students' learning. This can be achieved by allowing the teacher to monitor and provide feedback directly to the students through a shared virtual environment. The students are also supported by the technology which allows them to repeat exercises and view their mistakes. Some programs, such as *Word Engine* <http://www.wordengine.jp/>, even provide online interaction with instructors, thereby increasing further the opportunities for authentic communication with more than just one instructor.

Allow students more flexibility in scheduling and selecting study materials

The goal of many language programmes is to increase student independence and provide self-directed learning opportunities. As Asoka (2010) writes, "It is commonly accepted that successful

learners are reflective, self-directed and able to use a range of learner strategies in effective and appropriate combination. The more strategies the learner uses the more they can investigate, process, and be thorough in their learning." Independent study using online materials provides students with just such opportunities for self directing their learning, as they can control the pace, the time, and the extent of the learning. And because these materials are instantly reviewable, they can even control their success. Furthermore, increased outcome gains due to these additional benefits enhance flexibility and convenience for students through the integration of face-to-face instruction with online learning communities. Many of the activities they access offer opportunities to interact with other students or staff, providing even more chances to control their learning.

Increase evaluation opportunities

Evaluating students, especially in regards to classwork participation, is often quite subjective. In the classroom, the monitoring of student engagement in the learning process by the teacher requires several techniques such as moving around the room, reading body language, and listening to conversations. An online component allows for more detailed evaluation of student engagement with the course material. The educator has access to a variety of data: the amount of time a student spends on the programme, the extent of participation in collaborative activities, their progress with the material, frequency of access to the programme, to name but a few of the resources available to the teacher for evaluation purposes (Davis, 2010). Because this assessment is objective, it gives the teacher the data required to really assess student progress, and intervene when necessary. This, combined with the more humanistic, subjective elements of classroom assessment, provides a clearer indication of progress for both teacher and student.

Limitations and challenges of blended learning

As has been discussed earlier, there are numerous benefits to a blended learning environment/programme,

but there are also drawbacks. Because of its reliance on technology, there are several challenges that such a programme poses to both educators and students alike, including technological skills, study skills, critical thinking skills, and administrative skills.

One of the challenges of a blended learning environment is the range of technological skills among students. Even in the current environment of widespread use of computers and the Internet, there are still students entering university with minimal computer skills or the ability to use online resources. These skills are not only with the hardware and software, but also with cognition. "Having grown up in a computer age does not make today's students automatically savvy consumers of electronic resources" (Howard, 2010). This *uneducated* consumption of electronic resources needs to be addressed if we as educators expect our students to not only make full use of programmes within our schools that are reliant on technology, but to also effectively utilise the ever-expanding world of electronic information. As a *blended* librarian at Buffalo State College of the State University of New York rightly puts it, "First you have to understand the nature of information. You have to identify what you need and be able to understand why you need it, and at the same time, if you've located something, understand who created it and why they created it" (Howard, 2010). These are some of the knock-on effects that the use of blended learning has. For any student to succeed in a blended learning environment, they need the ability to use the hardware and then manipulate and assimilate the material provided. Not to provide learners with these skills, at least in part, would be a failing on the part of any such programme designer, and a significant limiting factor in the success of the programme.

Davidson and Waddington (2010) argue that the systems that are provided by educational institutions do not match the technological ecologies of the students. Course Management Systems such as Moodle do not "connect" with students, who are more familiar with contrasting technologies such as social networking systems (e.g., *Mixi, Gree*, and *Facebook*). The students' detailed familiarity and use of cellular

phones as opposed to computers for accessing online material does not lend well to a smooth transition into a computer-based learning environment. It does, however, indicate an understanding and sensitivity towards newer technology which may increase their adaptability and willingness to use the programme.

The adoption of a blended learning programme also poses a challenge to the educators involved. Although we would assume that teachers new to the field would be more likely to embrace the use of technology for teaching, research conducted in the United States shows that teachers' years of experience has little effect on the difference in frequency of technology use for instructional purposes. What was found was that "...if we intend to increase the use of technology for instructional purposes it is not enough to just increase access to the technology, as it will not necessarily result in increasing actual usage" (Grunwald Associates, 2010). The predominant reason many K-12 teachers in the U.S. gave for not using specific technology devices was that it "wasn't necessary for their lessons." The challenge, therefore, seems to lie with providing not only sufficient technology, but more importantly with the knowledge, through training or other means, of how the technology can be used to enhance their lessons. "It's a lot of work to learn new teaching methods and adapt new technologies" (Benton, 2009). This upgrade in teaching skills is not only time intensive, but also creates extra stress for the educator who more often than not falls into the role of trouble-shooter when students experience problems with the technological side of the programme. Teachers can end up spending more of their time on technical issues than on the material itself, especially if students are novices in the programme or the school's equipment is outdated or poorly maintained.

Implementing the programme

Case study: Seinan Jogakuin University

The Department of English at Seinan Jogakuin University is now in its 5th year, so the Oral English programme has a strong foundation already in

place. This programme is for first-year students, and provides them with two 90-minute classes a week, each taught by different native-English speakers. The focuses of the course are on reviewing and consolidating what they already know, and helping them to gain competency in using this English.

Until the 2010 academic year, both Oral English classes had used the same textbook, with teachers moving through it sequentially, alternating content depending on progress. This programme was supplemented to a degree by teacher-made materials, plus the students had access to some study materials on our departmental website's Moodle installation at <seinan-jo.com/study/>. For this year, we decided to increase the scope of the classes, with one class focusing on grammar and vocabulary (using the textbook "*Side-by-Side*"), and the other on a more communicative approach. In this second class, it was decided to include elements of e-learning instruction, so the search began for a textbook that included a blended learning component. The textbook itself needed to be usable in a classroom programme that would be flexible, combining both the material from the textbook itself with supplementary activities provided by the teachers. It also needed to offer an additional online e-learning programme that could be used by the students for semi-independent study.

After examining the few offerings available, we finally opted to use Books 2 and 3 of Pearson-Longman's *iZone* series. We felt that this series had the best material available of any current blended learning system in Japan at the time, both in the textbook and online. The website seemed adequately organised, and the student instructions were very well laid out. As their website states:

> *iZone is a dynamic learning experience, focusing on strategies to help students communicate and improve their fluency. A four-level, integrated skills course, iZone is a fully blended print-digital solution that will help students learn how to keep their conversations going in English, become better listeners, ask for help and much, much more.*

In their promotional material, they also tout the following features:

- Creates more time for communicative practice in class
- Saves teachers valuable preparation and administration time
- Provides out-of-the-box teaching solutions and more flexible options
- Motivates students with innovative online features and clear progress display features

We also felt choosing this blended learning solution was consistent with our current departmental goal of putting students into subscription-based services, rather than buying expensive (and soon outdated) software.

The two teachers involved with this course have collaborated on the development of the programme, working on everything from implementation to orientation, supplementary materials, ongoing evaluation, and student counselling.

Our experiences

While both of the teachers involved in this programme have communicated regularly and have generally experienced the same successes and trials, there are still unique issues that each has had to address while tweaking the way their courses have run. In this section, each instructor will discuss these specific issues.

Instructor 1

It is this instructor's view that we should start off with some personal experiences before discussing the programme being used at this university. Over the last few years, the instructor has used various programmes and made several attempts at using computer work to complement the classwork. It must be said from the outset that there have not been any truly successful results; it could be said that the personal experience of using supplemental computer activities and programmes has ranged from the miserable to passable. We must, however, keep in mind that even non-tech courses have their problems. Fortunately, the experiences have been improving progressively over time, and have consequently improved attitudes

towards a blended learning environment.

So what are some of the problems that have been encountered through the various experiences? From a practical perspective it would have to be said that preparedness is the biggest and most influential factor, both by the students and personally as the educator. The initial preparation of the students is a critical part in whether the programme is successful or not. Getting the students started properly takes quite a bit of time at the beginning, but is worth every minute to reduce the workload later in the semester.

The more preparation that has gone into understanding how the programme works, the better the experience for the educator. In the preparation process, however, it is difficult to anticipate how the programme will proceed and how the students will react to it. Unlike a traditional programme where we can use other materials or fall back on using the textbook, with the computer element it is not a matter of redirecting the students to another task, but it becomes an exercise in troubleshooting.

Troubleshooting is probably the most time consuming and frustrating element of the e-learning process. As introduced earlier, the range in computer literacy is one obstacle to a smooth running blended learning programme. There are occasionally technical issues to be dealt with, although many problems that students have are not technical in nature, but rather have to do with the students' computer skills and personal troubleshooting abilities. Too often, the students have not been able to recognize the problem they themselves have created. A simple example is the false input of a URL, to which they claim that they could not access the site; another is that they have not followed the directions that have been provided and as a result the programme does not do what they expect it to. These problems are partially supported by Davidson and Waddington's (2010) claim of technological imbalance between the students and the educational institution.

Another challenge that the instructor must deal with is the management of e-learning: the general maintenance of the learning environment, as well as the distribution of information. This must be kept up on a regular basis so as to provide the students with

a problem-free learning environment. However, this continual upkeep can tax the instructor, especially as it must be done electronically. In addition, if the management system does not follow pedagogical principles, Govindasamy (2002) contends that the implementation process will be jeopardized and result in resistance to e-learning by faculty and students, as well as poor student performance.

Several of these issues are directly connected to the interface design of the e-learning programme. In the programme that is currently being used at this university, there are several issues that have been noted by the other instructor, particularly the way in which the instructor accesses the data.

Instructor 2

In this instructor's case, there have been two very specific areas that have caused problems, and which need to be discussed here: The textbook content, and the degree to which the students have been able to use the online content.

The textbook content

Because this half of the course was meant to offer an approach to language learning that would foster greater communicative competence, we required a textbook that would facilitate this form of instruction in the classroom. As Canale and Swain (2002) state, a communicative approach "...is organized on the basis of communicative functions (e.g., apologizing, describing, inviting, promising) that a given learner or group of learners needs to know and emphasizes the ways in which particular grammatical forms may be used to express these functions appropriately." In other words, our goal has been for our students to take what they have learned in previous schools and in their other classes, and apply these English skills to more authentic and concrete situations. To some degree, the textbook has helped with this through a usable choice of topics (see Appendix 1). However, the activities and exercises the book offers are limited in scope, use too many specific forms of language, and generally fail to ignite any meaningful dialogue on the part of the students. Generally, the book has a beta feel to it... a first version that is waiting on

subsequent upgrades to build some maturity. This hasn't been too much of an issue because the syllabus has stretched a one-semester book out to a full year's programme, so we have been able to supplement with our own material extensively, and it is generally these materials that have fostered language usage.

Online content and the student

Observing the students remotely as they work through the online content, it soon becomes apparent that there are vast ranges in item difficulty within the material. In particular with the listening areas, the speaking and content is of a far higher level than the other activities, and causes a lot of frustration for the students. To some degree this is both expected and desired—competency in listening is generally higher than other language skills—however, without any form of scaffolding around which to support the task, even a listening activity can fail. Other frustrations include a lack of variety in activity styles, and, for the teacher, inefficiencies in the way data can be accessed, leading to difficulties in monitoring student progress.

Recommendations

To fully explore the viability of this form of instruction and learning in our school, the course will need to be adjusted to allow students to develop their skills of communicative competency. The following recommendations offer ways in which these necessary improvements could be carried out:

1. *Longer and more intensive initial orientation with smaller class groups*: As was learned this year, it is not enough to simply rely on the provided support materials to teach the students how to get started in the programme. In this first year, the orientation was carried out with all first-year students at the same time. Some students did not have their textbooks, others had network access problems, plus the website itself had some teething issues with network traffic. This led to only about 20% of the students being able

to get started, with others having to find time to meet the teacher for extra guidance. From next year, the initial class will be run from a computer suite in smaller class groups.

2. *A clear and definitive work schedule*: While one of the aims of this e-learning system is to motivate students to be more self-pacing and independent in their studies, they still need a set of deadlines and work standards to work towards. The students need to be encouraged to work ahead to their own pace—and, to be honest, around 25% of the students this year did study ahead and push themselves to improve their mini-test grades—but a minimum set of achieved material by specific dates is also necessary.

3. *Out-of-hours support and tutoring*: Around a quarter of the students this year did have real problems with the format and the material. Some of these students actively sought extra help, but to make this more consistent, it is going to be necessary to set aside specific times when students can get help. This is probably best achieved in a computer room after classes are over.

4. *More integration of the online material into the class programme*: Our attitude this year has been to have the e-learning component more or less standing alone from the regular class programmes, which has led to students seeing the two areas as separate courses almost. We need to bring that material into class in such ways as using the videos for class activities, running activities from the sound files, using the writing assignments as material for class activities, and so on.

Conclusion

Combining, as it does, the two systems of traditional classroom instruction with technology-based delivery, blended learning would seem to be the natural evolution for language learning classrooms. The proven need for personal interaction shows that there is still a place for the teacher-guided language classroom. However, the wealth of material and learning tools available using technology, multimedia, and the Internet cannot be ignored. They potentially provide learners with a rich resource of learning opportunities that the classroom alone could never provide. They also give these learners the opportunity to select the material they need, and work on it at their own pace. These materials can be delivered economically and efficiently, and they provide educators with many levels of options for oversight of the learners in their care.

However, there are definite issues that need addressing. Quality and range of e-learning materials need to be rigorously maintained so that learners are actually getting a variety of material that is useful to them. Delivery systems need to be simple, fast, and reliable. Both learners and educators need access to responses, feedback, and data that will help them make informed choices about their educational needs. And they need training and support to develop the necessary technical skills to use the material.

Thus schools need to make a choice—whether to pursue developing their own systems of blended learning, or to use commercial packages. Creating their own materials means they can tailor them exactly to their programme, but the time required to create such resources is enormous, and the technological skills the teachers need are still high. Both of these issues can be dealt with by using a commercial system, yet costs are high, and the school is locked into using material that possibly doesn't match their requirements. On top of that, at the time of writing there still seems to be a lack of maturity in what is available, as publishers are only just beginning to put resources into developing these courses.

Having said that, blended learning does have the potential to offer a viable solution to the current dilemmas that many schools face, as it addresses the requirements of language learners to have access to both personal tutoring and a wider range of materials and learning tools. What is needed is an active and ongoing evaluation of the blended learning environments they are using, with developers using

this feedback to strengthen both the classroom and online resources they are tasked with developing.

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Appendix 1: iZone topics

iZone Book 2

1. Sports for All—Sports people play and why
2. Stressed out!—Causes of stress
3. The World of Food—Countries and the foods they produce
4. A Changing World—Technological, environmental
5. Virtual Space—Using the Internet
6. Buy One, Get One Free—Advertising
7. Getting Around Town—Traveling around urban areas
8. Staying Home—Activities we do at home
9. The Future: Where are we going?—Global and personal futures
10. Being Into It—Personal interests

iZone Book 3

1. Technology Moves On—Digital consumer goods
2. My Style—Fashionable clothes and hairstyles
3. Eating Habits—Eating a healthy diet
4. Role Models—People who are respected and admired
5. A Busy Week—Attending cultural activities and special events
6. What's wrong?—Accidents, illnesses and medical care
7. What's the point?—Reasons for getting a university education
8. Don't forget it!—Memory and recalling embarrassing experiences
9. Guess what? Gossip and news
10. Reducing Consumption—Recycling, reusing and reducing

混合学習は語学学習の問題の解決の鍵となり得るか？

マルコム・スワンソン、アンデリュー・ジッツマン

＜要　旨＞

　十数年前より、インターネットなどの技術を語学学習に適用する動きが出て来ている。それは、コスト、利便性、経験の幅、学習者の動機などの理由が背景として考えられる。その評価は賛否さまざまであり、伝統的な教師主導の指導方法に戻ったケースもある。

インターネットを利用する最新の授業方法と伝統的な授業方法の間の折衷的な方法もある。e-ラーニングと伝統的方法の両方を利用するものであり、混合学習(Blended Learning)と呼ばれるインターネットを活用したプログラムである。

　本論では、語学学習における混合学習の現状と、西南女学院大学英語学科におけるその運用について取り上げる。結論としては、混合学習には解決すべき問題はあるものの、語学学習をする学生にとっては、能力向上のチャンスが増えるようである。

キーワード：混合学習、オンライン学習、適合、学生中心の学習

西南女学院大学人文学部英語学科