The next time you go to a conference, check the number of times the term ‘blended learning’ (BL) occurs in the workshop titles. Probably a lot. BL remains a ‘buzz’ term in language teaching. While the term means different things to different people, a general understanding has emerged that it refers to a course which combines face-to-face classroom teaching with an online component. This article explores ten key aspects of BL. It attempts to establish where we are now … and where we’re going.

1 A brief history

The roots of BL lie within the corporate sector. Rather than send an employee away on an expensive course, why not have them combine training with work, and save costs? Education (unfortunately) inherited this idea that by moving some of a course online, costs can be saved. Universities have long used Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) to support tertiary courses in all disciplines. It was around the time of my own co-authored book on Blended Learning (2009) that the term began to gain importance in the world of language teaching.

2 What does the research say?

BL can be related to a number of learning theories, including behaviourism (see: many interactive exercises found in web-based materials) and socio-constructivism (see: the community-building associated with online collaboration). Studies of BL draw on work in related
fields, noticeably CALL (computer-aided language learning), SLA (second-language acquisition), motivation and learner autonomy.

There is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that BL produces better learning outcomes. However, proving through pre-and post-test results that the group taking a Blended Course out-performs the non-blended course is challenging. Some reports setting out to compile statistical analysis (Means et al 2009) are not primarily situated within language learning contexts. Others run into what is termed the ‘no significant difference’ syndrome. So, claims about the superiority of BL need to be taken cautiously.

3 Definitions and dimensions

The definition used by Sharma and Westbrook (2016:320) describes BL as “A course designed as a mix of face-to-face and distance learning, with both elements being an important part of the whole”. Other definitions listed by Sharma (2010) include BL as a combination of different methodologies and BL as using a combination of different technologies; both of these definitions could, interestingly, be applied to wholly online teaching.

The term can have a positive connotation: one plus one is ‘more than two’. It can also have a negative connotation, where blending results in a mish-mash of a course, with no underlying coherence.

It is possible to see BL as wide or narrow. ‘Wide’ would be the definition by Sharma and Barrett (2009:7) of BL as combining “a f2f classroom component with an appropriate use of technology”, my italics, thus including Interactive whiteboards; ‘narrow’ would be a definition such as ‘f2f plus online’ which excludes the use of CD-ROMs between classes (offline).

4 Why blend?

One of the commonest reasons cited by schools as to why they choose to blend is ‘time’. There is not enough time for students to cover what they need to in order to learn a language within the constraints of the class timetable.

One key question is: can BL save money? There is huge disagreemen on this point. Many commercial organizations cite ‘cost-saving’ as an argument for blending; however, schools who have moved part of the curriculum online often report unexpected, invisible costs.

Other common reasons given for blending include combining the positives of classroom teaching with the advantages of online learning, considered to be studying at your own pace, at a place of your choice; and ‘differentiation’ – using the platform as a way of delivering personalized, individual learning.

5 The challenges of BL

One of the biggest challenges in setting up a BL course is that the course fails to satisfy anyone’s learning preference. The students who enjoy the class may not contribute to the knowledge building occurring in the online environment, while those who enjoy working online may dislike the time restrictions imposed by the timetable. Typical feedback on many BL courses is that students do not see the link between what is done in class and what is done online; some students do not perceive the online parts of the blend to be of equal value to the in-class sessions. Both students and teachers may encounter technical problems with the hardware or software, which can prove de-motivating.

6 Models of BL

There are number of models of BL courses. One model describes courses in percentage terms (Hockly and Clandfield 2010: 11-16). A course falls typically at the following points: mostly in-class, supported by online work (70%-30%); a hybrid model (50%-50%); mostly online, (20%-80%), with students dropping into a school for occasional classes; and finally, 100% online, which strictly speaking is OL (online learning) and not BL.

In a ‘dual track’ approach, students have 24 / 7 access to their online materials alongside their taught course. These two modes of instruction may combine well, or there may be no relation whatsoever between the taught course and what the students are exploring within the online environment.

The ‘flipped classroom’ approach is seen as a natural extension of BL. The language input is done online and followed up in-class through discussions, group work and the teacher providing individual attention. This model originated in the teaching of subjects like maths and chemistry. Flipping is currently much-discussed: is the online study ‘just’ homework? do teachers need to become content creators, making video lessons using screen-capture software?

7 Success with BL

There are four critical factors in working towards a successful BL course: appropriacy, complementarity, attitude and training.

Appropriacy: it is appropriate to develop fluency in the classroom, and to work on ‘critical thinking’ skills through an online forum, which adds the element of ‘thinking’ time into the discussion.
Complementarity: this refers to the genuine integration of the ‘in-class’ and ‘online’ elements.

Attitude: the success of a BL course may depend on the teacher holding positive beliefs about BL which are transmitted to the learners.

Teacher training: teacher training and learner training are both absolutely essential to make BL work.

8 Constructing a BL course

Drawing on work by Whittaker and Tomlinson (2013) for the British Council, here is a four-stage framework for creating a BL course:

Stage one: context. Firstly, it is important to decide the reasons for blending. Listing these reasons will be instrumental in any choice of delivery platform.

Stage two: course design. This involves getting the balance right in terms of time spent on each of the modes, and the way they are integrated.

Stage three: learners and teachers. This stage involves planning the training necessary for both students and teachers.

Stage four: evaluating the blend. Here, a school could evaluating the choice of software or the platform, or attempt to ascertain the effect of BL on student achievement.

9 What shall I blend?

The biggest single choice facing institutions is which LMS (learning management system) to choose.

Schools can choose a publisher-produced platform linked to a course book, full of interactive materials written by experienced ELT authors. Such platforms include tracking tools which allow teachers to see data on their student performance, such as their scores for each exercise.

The alternative is for teachers to create their own local, personalised materials. This has long been possible using programs such as Hot Potatoes. The English360 platform includes authoring tools, allowing teacher-produced materials to be incorporated alongside web-based materials (authentic texts, YouTube videos) and high-quality publisher-produced content.

Well-known platforms include Blackboard and Moodle, commonly used by universities. These contain a huge range of features, including forums, wikis, quiz makers and tracking tools. Edmodo is a platform similar in appearance to Facebook, and includes tools for communicating in real-time (chat) and through forums.

There are many other platforms which can could be used in a blend: blogs, wikis, Google+ and Dropbox; platforms specifically devised for online teaching, like WizIQ. In fact, a BL course can be forged without an LMS, using an eBook, IELTS practice material, a DVD-ROM – the list is almost endless.

10 The future

Two key developments are ‘mobile learning’ and ‘adaptive learning’.

Mobile learning: nowadays, learners can access mobile-friendly’ versions of their LMS on a tablet or even a Smartphone.

Adaptive learning: adaptive platforms can provide personalized feedback, changing the learning pathway in response to each students’ individual answer. A lot of investment is being poured into adaptive technologies, making this an area to look out for in future.

BL remains one of the most exciting areas in language teaching. The good news for teachers is that, no matter how fast the technology changes, it is principled pedagogy which lies at the heart of a good language course. Focus on the pedagogy, work through the framework carefully and critically, and your school can achieve a successfully blended course.
References


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