

Success with Blended learning

Although the term ‘blended learning’ means different things to different people, the most widely accepted definition involves combining a traditional, classroom course (‘face to face’) with ‘online learning’. Ideally, the course combines the best elements of the classroom with the best elements of distance learning, such as being free to study anytime, anywhere.

What implications does this approach have for the language teacher? Let me use the IELTS preparation course I’m involved in as an example. Firstly, my students have joined Edmodo, a free web-based platform to which I can post materials and useful links. The platform allows students to communicate with each other (and me) beyond the four walls of the classroom. Secondly, my students spend time using exam-practice software, which includes video tutorials. Thirdly, noticing that so many of my students have Smartphones, I run regular learner training sessions on useful apps.

But will my students bother to go to their learning platform? I don’t believe they will do so unless they perceive the course ‘as a whole’. I like to imagine that the classroom and online work are like two pieces of a jig-saw puzzle, snapping together nicely into a ‘blended’ model. How might this work in practice?

Grammar: I clarify ‘fuzzy’ areas of grammar in class. The on-line, interactive exercises offer extra practice in ‘crisp’ areas of language.

Vocabulary: while I present and practise new words in class, I also suggest apps such as Quizlet for students to store and review their new words electronically.

Listening: although I continue to use recorded material in class, I add to this work on building effective listening strategies. At home, students can listen to podcasts, pausing replaying tricky sections. They can watch video podcasts, then re-watch sections with sub-titles. It is clear that real improvement in listening can be made autonomously.

Reading: one new IELTS app helps students develop their skimming by taking the words in text away, one by one. The student can choose how fast the words disappear – slowly, medium fast or quickly. This activity is remarkably motivating.

Phonology: all my students know and use the phonemic chart app to practise saying tricky phonemes.

For a blended learning course to be successful, I see three essential ingredients: appropriacy, integration and attitude.

Decide what is most appropriate for each part of the blend. In-class discussions help develop fluency, but for deeper, critical thinking, using the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) gives students time to draft and edit a reply before posting.

A blended course isn’t a face to face with a bit of ‘on-line’ tacked on; it needs to be a thought-through course with a pedagogical rationale, in which each part of the blend is truly well-integrated.

Finally, attitude is a key factor in success. It is the teacher’s job to communicate to the students the validity of the blended approach in a positive way.

Useful reading

Barrett, B and Sharma, P (2007) *Blended Learning: using technology in and beyond the language classroom* (Macmillan)

Sharma, P (2010) Key concepts in ELT: Blended learning (ELTJ: Vol 64 / 4 Oxford)