

Strengths and Drawbacks of Blended Learning for Second Language Learning

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Abstract: This paper discusses the strengths and drawbacks of blended language learning. There exists a great debate about what constitutes blended learning. By considering its advantages and disadvantages, we contend that there is a need for higher education to embrace blended learning in order to increase educational opportunities and improve learning outcomes. In order to support this argument, this paper addresses the transformative potential of blended learning based on recommendations for class redesign from previous studies. This paper then concludes by providing an agenda for further research.

Keywords: Blended learning; Motivation for language learning; Task-based language teaching and learning; E-learning; Computer-assisted language learning

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1. Introduction

Language use is usage-based; furthermore, it is a social behavior that is purposeful and consistently occurs in context. Communicative language teaching views language learners as partners in learning, as “they encourage learner participation in communicative events and self-assessment of progress” ^[1]. A communicative language teaching approach suggests that learners should take communicative risks, while teachers should provide learners with content-based and task-based curricula so that learners can develop learning strategies by practice ^[2]. Task-based language teaching relies on the completion of “tasks” that are relevant to situations the learner might find themselves in. By sticking to task-based teaching and learning, learners are encouraged to negotiate meaning with others and take risks, which would ultimately foster the development of learners’ communicative competence ^[3].

In the language learning process, motivation is one of the most essential factors that facilitate learners’ attitudes toward learning. Dörnyei and Ryan have proposed that motivation “provides the primary impetus to initiate second language (L2) learning and later the driving force to sustain the long, often tedious learning process” ^[4]. In a study, Gardner and Lambert investigated the relationship between language learning and motivation, proposing that L2 learners demonstrate either intrinsic motivation or extrinsic motivation when learning languages ^[5]. Exploring the function of motivation in language learning is significant as it has positive effects on learners’ persistence and enthusiasm regarding language acquisition.

With the widespread development of technology and digital media, language teachers are taking advantage of web-based technology in their L2 classrooms and integrating online technologies with traditional instructor-led classrooms. This is referred to as “blended learning.” Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning as well as the opportunities that will arise in the fields of language learning and pedagogy. We first introduce the concept of blended learning,

followed by the strengths and drawbacks of this learning approach by reviewing previous literature. Subsequently, we discuss the transformative potential of blended language learning and the opportunities that this research area will bring to the second or foreign language classroom. Lastly, suggestions are provided for further research.

2. What is blended learning?

By virtue of the innovation of language teaching methodologies, a wide range of pedagogical strategies have surfaced in second language classrooms, with blended learning becoming the most common one. The definition of blended learning has been proposed by several researchers, and one of the most widely accepted concepts is contributed by Garrison and Kanuka, who have defined blended learning as the combination of face-to-face learning and online-based activities in the classroom ^[6]. Later on, Sharma divided blended learning into three categories: a combination of face-to-face and online teaching, a combination of technologies, as well as a combination of methodologies ^[7].

According to Sharma, the term “blended learning” refers to a method of integrating traditional face-to-face classroom learning with computer-assisted online learning approaches ^[7]. In this case, the online component will provide a virtual learning environment for L2 learners, including supplement sources for course content ^[8]. Teachers and learners may also use synchronous electronic tools or applications to achieve efficient communication and interactions. Language teachers often take advantage of web-based technologies to achieve their teaching goals. They also anticipate that L2 learners will be able to break away from the monotony of traditional classroom forms and be intrigued by various web-based technologies during the language acquisition process, thus achieving positive outcomes in language learning. In addition, Oliver and Trigwell mentioned that “blended learning” can be regarded as the mixing of media and online technology in an e-learning environment ^[9]. This suggests that different online technologies or social media, such as Zoom meetings, Microsoft Teams, internet telephone, and so forth, can be used to support communication between language teachers and learners.

Followed by such ideas, an improved concept of blended learning has been proposed by Sharma. This learning mode refers to a combination of various pedagogical strategies, such as constructivism, behaviorism, and cognitivism ^[7]. These pedagogical methodologies are used by language teachers to deliver significant teaching achievements, either with or without online technology. Later on, Claypole defined blended learning as “a combination of real-world plus in-world,” which reflects the approach of first giving learners a face-to-face classroom session, followed by a technology-based online class ^[10]. Language teachers believe that the combination of face-to-face learning and online self-learning may contribute to students’ understanding of class materials and the discovery of their preferred ways in relation to the delivery mode ^[7]. In other words, the blended learning mode creates a diverse learning environment that can meet the requirements of different types of L2 learners. Fadde and Vu described blended online learning as a mode in which both instructors and learners utilize online technologies in virtual learning environments ^[11]. Therefore, the term “blended learning” has varying definitions according to different contexts, with the most widely accepted one as the combination of the advantages of synchronous learning activities (*i.e.*, face-to-face) and asynchronous learning activities, such as text-based online learning ^[8,10].

3. Strengths and opportunities of blended learning for languages

According to Hockly, the use of blended approaches in language teaching brings considerable benefits to learners in both face-to-face interaction and online learning, and one of the most significant outcomes is the improvement of learners’ motivation for learning languages ^[8]. Motivation has become an influential factor for second or foreign language learning, as it fosters a positive attitude toward learning. Language learning may not succeed without persistence and clear objectives ^[5]. Vanslambrouck *et al.* have pointed

out that the flexible learning opportunities of blended approaches increase students' motivation to participate in various class activities and tasks ^[12]. It has been indicated that the blended learning mode promotes students' autonomy in learning. This innovative approach gives students the chance to learn using online tools and technology, thus revealing their intrinsic motivation for language learning ^[12]. Law *et al.* have investigated the influence of blended learning environments on L2 learners' motivation and suggested that learning motivation enhances the willingness of learners to enroll in blended courses ^[13]. Besides, learner demonstrate an active attitude toward group activities and course tasks, and both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors can be found in the learners' performance in a blended learning environment. Therefore, driven by their self-motivational systems, L2 learners are able to study independently, despite the shortage of supervision or face-to-face communication with instructors.

The blended approaches to language learning also increase student engagement, thus promoting their comprehension of class materials ^[14]. Learners can participate in classroom sessions with the assistance of instructors, followed by the consolidation of key concepts by engaging in in-class activities or discussions through digital engagement tools, such as *Poll Everywhere*, discussion boards, and so forth. Fadde and Vu have demonstrated the effectiveness of the discussion board in blended learning environments; it not only helps develop learners' critical thinking skills related to asynchronous discussions, but also provides opportunities for students to interact with each other's work and share their ideas ^[11]. The variety in the delivery of class materials contributes to the creation of a more attractive learning environment, which significantly improves learners' achievement. At the same time, learners demonstrate positive attitudes toward blended learning due to its flexible and convenient nature ^[15]. In this situation, the advantages of having persistent online access to resources are appreciated by most learners, as they can review key concepts to reinforce their memories at any time. Besides, the feasibility of accessing PowerPoint slides before courses may facilitate learners' understanding of the course content so that they can easily follow the lessons ^[16]. Blended learning enables students to absorb knowledge through a self-paced approach, particularly when a group of people has different learning styles. The self-paced approach boosts learners' awareness of language learning and their capacity for self-reflection. In this context, students who struggle in traditional and fast-paced language classrooms might benefit from blended learning, thus thriving as successful language learners.

It is worth mentioning that online blended learning provides innovative conversational opportunities for learners, which also allows instructors to focus more on interpersonal communication ^[11,15]. Blended learning approaches create opportunities for learners to collaborate online by participating in group activities or games. This facilitates the achievement of language learning effects. For introverted learners who are afraid of speaking in traditional language classrooms, online learning systems are beneficial for building their confidence by encouraging them to speak in front of people with the camera turned off. This increases the interaction and exchange of ideas among students. Language acquisition is a gradual process, and blended approaches allow students to reduce the foreign language anxiety and stress that they may experience in a traditional classroom. On the other hand, the delivery mode of blended learning enables globally dispersed language learners to receive consistent and semi-personal content delivery by gathering together in a short period of time ^[17]. In this case, it offers L2 learners possibilities for cross-cultural communication, which can cultivate learners' communicative strategies in a global context. Learners may also have the chance to receive additional exposure to the target language by interacting with native speakers or watching video materials through online learning systems. More importantly, the use of online technologies in blended learning is regarded as an efficient pedagogical method by language teachers ^[18]. By exploring different technologies or tools for language learning, the quality of education and information assimilation has improved as well. Consequently, in the era of modern information technology, blended learning brings opportunities for students to access advanced network technology, while making teaching

more productive and diverse.

4. Drawbacks of blended learning for languages

Blended approaches to language learning create opportunities by providing students with both asynchronous and synchronous learning options across the geographical and physical boundaries of the traditional classroom. The innovations and applications of web-based technologies enable students to flexibly engage with authentic target language interaction, which is fundamental for second language development, especially for students who have limited interaction with technology beyond the classroom^[19]. Although the advantages of blended learning are well recognized, its drawbacks have been pointed out by several studies.

The complexity of blended learning in designing is a drawback. The increasing time and locational flexibility in learning and instruction for learners is considered to be one of the benefits of blended learning^[19]. Such a feature is attractive to those who are busy, those who feel anxious or uncomfortable with face-to-face learning, or those who want to escape the traditionally passive role of students in the classroom^[20]. Consequently, the easing of time and locational constraints result in an increase in learners' diversity. A subsequent challenge that is faced by teachers is a diversity of instruction needs (for example, learners from different L1 backgrounds with different learning styles and motivations) and variance of student performance within a class, which would be hard to address virtually^[19]. The designer must consider the target learners' needs and their access to technology, the suitability of the subject for a blended way of instruction, and individual differences in order to establish its appropriateness in different contexts (*e.g.*, high school, college, university) and with different conditions (*e.g.*, class length, different assignments)^[21]. As Nicolson *et al.* have proposed, the complexity of designing and implementing language learning and instruction in a blended setting is one of the major concerns of researchers^[22]. The diversity within a blended classroom increases flexibility and creates opportunities for different learners; however, it also creates challenges for instructors.

The physical distance between students and teachers is a potential drawback for blended learning. Language interaction occurring asynchronously may lead to the loss of motivation and create a sense of isolation^[19]. Arispe and Blake conducted an empirical study to explore the social and cognitive qualities that affected students' outcomes in hybrid online language learning^[20]. The study found that technology can exacerbate students' self-discipline concerns. Students who are more self-driven tend to examine their individual progress and are less subject to or dependent on teachers' regulations. They tend to thrive in blended learning language courses. The effectiveness of blended learning is dependent on the learner's self-discipline and responsibility^[23]. The traditional passive role of students has been changed in blended learning. Students have the authority to decide how to study, what to study, and when to study in blended learning. Hence, students who are not familiar with independent learning would not be able to benefit fully from the course^[21]. Arispe and Blake concluded that online learning may not be ideal for every type of learner, and students should be informed before enrolling in a certain course^[20]. On the other hand, instructors may find it challenging to interact with students online, particularly when instructing a large group where it is difficult to create a sense of community and foster motivation, thus leading to another drawback of blended learning: less interaction between teachers and students^[19]. A deterioration in students' self-discipline and their sense of isolation may occur especially when the instructors are not sufficiently experienced or unfamiliar with the technologies, or when they do not fully utilize certain instructional techniques to improve the participation of students^[19,21]. Contrary to a traditional classroom where teachers can engage students in learning face-to-face, the web-based component of blended learning seems to limit the use of such strategies. Moreover, their beliefs about web-based teaching also have an influence on the effectiveness of blended learning. Face-to-face communicative teaching is still considered to be the optimal

environment by many language teachers ^[19]. Several researchers have contended that the emphasis on communicative and interactive tasks in the communicative teaching approach facilitates students' engagement with authentic language use in real-world situations, thus enabling them to acquire grammar through usage. The task-based communicative approach is considered to be most effective when conducted face-to-face ^[24]. Hence, some teachers may be hesitant to embrace the online component of blended learning, and the importance of human interaction has been repeatedly stressed for successful online course delivery ^[19,21,23].

Briefly, careful instructor guidance and technical support are crucial components for successful course implementation ^[19]. Blended learning can multiply educational possibilities by combining the benefits of reflective online learning with dynamic communicative face-to-face classrooms ^[6].

5. Transformative potential of blended learning

Blended learning provides a transformative language learning experience for learners who are able to engage in a learning community regardless of their physical location. In the context of higher education, blended learning increases opportunities for practicing and individualized feedback, in which learners can control the input and review it at their own pace. The web-based platform provides a permanent study record for students and is often more reflective and thoughtful; meanwhile, such practice can be balanced with a face-to-face session, where learners can examine and practice their hypotheses of language through output, while receiving feedback either from peers or from the instructor ^[6]. School schedulers will also appreciate the reduced face-to-face time and the demand for classroom space that comes with blended learning, especially when such reduction can be achieved while maintaining and improving the quality of teaching and learning ^[19].

Blended learning has the potential to provide more educational possibilities and is considered to be more effective when compared to both traditional and fully online modes. For the above reason, a transformation or redesign from traditional face-to-face learning to blended learning seems to be desirable. The adaptability of blended learning also ensures that it can be used to address a wide range of needs of different programs in different schools, thus guaranteeing that the rationale for blending is highly contextualized to each institution. Mizza and Rubio put forward a series of examples where courses are designed or redesigned in a blended language learning format. They concluded that blended language learning can be used as a strategy in response to practical challenges faced by language programs with low student enrollment and to overcome time and space constraints ^[19]. Besides, the implication of blended language learning approach can reduce resource costs. In short, blended language learning is a low-risk strategy that can help overcome academic and financial problems, thus achieving better learning outcomes.

However, how can we create courses that take full advantage of both delivery modes while integrating multi-modal technology to maximize learning? From a teaching perspective, Mizza and Rubio argue that teachers and course designers need to first take into consideration of the existing activities, assignments, and course structures ^[19]. Teachers are responsible for deciding the suitability of the learning subject for both delivery modes in order to optimize learning outcomes and promote engagement. When adopting a blended mode, designers should follow the recommendations for redesigning based on previous studies. Twigg also argues that the need to teach design methodology is essential for the transformation process since "neither faculty nor administrators traditionally employ this approach to restructuring courses using information technology (IT)" ^[25]. Garrison and Kanuka further emphasize the need to develop standard policies and operations in order to support blended learning approaches ^[6].

In order to achieve better learning outcomes at low costs, the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) proposed six models for course redesign by taking advantage of the capabilities of technology ^[26]. These models include supplemental, replacement, emporium, fully online, buffet, and

linked workshop, with each model lying on the continuum from fully face-to-face to fully online interactions with students. According to NCAT, the six models are not the only options for course redesign, but rather a suggestion ^[26]. Among the six models, NCAT stressed on the supplemental model, which has been used predominantly in social and natural sciences courses. Technology-enhanced and online supplements have replaced some portions of face-to-face class time. A common ground that the models share is the use of a task-based communicative approach, whether conducted through an online format or traditional setting. The purpose of the communicative teaching methodology is to create an interactional environment that fosters the development of students' communicative competence, which is essential for second language acquisition. A blended language learning environment provides students not only with formal grammar instruction, but also sufficient input that covers a range of types of interaction. It also provides opportunities to students for meaningful, real-world interactions.

NCAT also stressed the role of students in the process of course redesigning ^[26]. The course redesign models have changed teaching and learning enterprises, shaping them to be more active and learner-focused. Therefore, students are obligated to become more independent and active in order to engage with the course content. Apart from different models for blended course structure per se, Garrison and Kanuka put forward certain issues that are relevant to the administration and development of blended learning ^[6]. They argued that blended learning approaches require considerable thought in five aspects.

Traditionally, many higher educational institutions offer technology-enhanced classes to a select population of students. The administration of the course is often managed by the individual faculties, which requires little administrative policy. However, blended learning is catering to a large number of students, providing learning opportunities that are both flexible and cost-effective. Therefore, in order to sustain blended learning, formal policies and operations are needed. Parallel to policy is planning, which contains two essential levels: strategic planning, which is instruction-oriented, involves the identification of needs, objectives, potential costs, and available resources; operational planning, on the other hand, is operations-oriented, and it involves attending to the administrative components. The combination of strategic and operational planning is essential in developing blended learning approaches.

Moreover, a careful assessment of financial, human, and technological resources is required in order to sustain and implement an effective blended learning approach. All three components are necessary to support and enhance the development and delivery of blended learning courses. When applying a blended learning approach to practice, both instructors and administration need to thoughtfully consider the scheduling of courses. Besides, providing support to both instructors and students is also critical to blended learning. For teachers, assistance with course development needs, time management, scheduling, and technical support is required. For students, assistance services are often in place to support students with technology access. NCAT also emphasized the importance of supporting students, suggesting that instructors or teaching assistants should offer students one-on-one, on-demand assistance rather than following a schedule ^[26].

On the one hand, the adoption of blended learning in campus-based higher education institutions seems to be inevitable. Once researchers explore the impact of blended learning and establish a clear policy and regulation for such an approach, the evolution will be rapid. On the other hand, it is also important for applied linguists to carefully evaluate the effectiveness and carry out the course redesign process by referring to various recommendations from previous studies.

6. Future research direction

Future research is needed to establish and examine the appropriateness and effectiveness of blended learning across different contexts. As Chenoweth has pointed out, both qualitative and quantitative data are needed in research, and these data should be analyzed from both students' and teachers' perspectives at a

minimum ^[21]. Arispe and Blake have also discussed the importance of individual factors in future studies ^[20]. While previous studies have examined blended learning in comparison to traditional face-to-face settings and fully online formats, personality and cognitive factors are relatively under-emphasized. Learners' autonomy should be further investigated since blended learning alters the traditional role of students as passive recipients within the classroom. The variables and characteristics of learners are also possible determinants for the success of blended learning. Finding a proper instrument to measure the correlation between individual differences and success in blended L2 learning is equally important for future studies. Non-instructional components should also be taken into account; for example, the aforementioned administrative policy and operational planning.

7. Conclusion

By focusing on the blended language learning approach, this paper discusses the strengths and drawbacks of blended learning. Previous studies have demonstrated the disadvantages of blended learning, one of which is that it may reduce classroom interactions between students and teachers. Besides, the diversity of instruction needs is another challenge for language teachers due to the different learning styles and backgrounds of learners. Meanwhile, this paper also points out the strengths of blended language learning. This approach not only improves learners' motivation to participate in language learning and class activities, but also provides innovative conversational opportunities to learners so that they can take full advantage of online technology to achieve communication in a global context. While discussing the transformative potential of blended learning, it has been suggested that higher education institutions need to take into account of the application of blended approaches since blended learning will facilitate learning outcomes and educational opportunities as well as enhance the efficiency of meaningful learning experiences. On the other hand, when considering a redesign from traditional classroom setting to blended learning, course designers and instructors should consider the recommendations from previous studies. The effectiveness and appropriateness of blended learning in different contexts should be evaluated in future research. Besides, researchers must continue to explore the development of a suitable instrument to assess the relationship between individual variations and success in blended language learning.

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