

Towards some aspects of Foreign Language Blended Teaching

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Abstract— The study is focused on aspects of effectiveness of blended foreign language teaching as a pedagogical model related to the widespread implementation of distance learning during 2020 pandemic. Blended foreign language teaching is therefore the most preferable educational context. Many aspects of its effectiveness have been discussed in the light of modern foreign language teaching methodologies. Blended learning, which is a mixture of different learning environments and methods, has given learners and teachers a potential and nowadays necessary basis for more effective learning and teaching. Considering the implementation of blended learning in foreign language teaching some important aspects are essential to examine in order to determine its effectiveness. It is obvious that different environments and teaching methods should complement efficiently each other in order to achieve learning objectives. The discrepancy between them can lead to confusion and dissatisfaction for both learners and teachers, who must try to put the individual components together in order to achieve a learner-centered conception and an effective learning experience.

Index Terms—blended, foreign language, educational model, learning environments

I. INTRODUCTION

Significant changes in the fundamental explanation of human learning have occurred over the last decades and new educational paradigm has evolved. A number of learning theories such as behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism have predetermined some educational models. Technologies have enlarged the information as a concept and drawn people’s attention, time and interests. Technologies changed our habits for acquiring and using knowledge, for communication and cooperation. In addition to changes in all spheres of public life, the education of children born after 1981 has changed, these who grew up with digital technologies, accepted them as an integral part of their daily lives and can no longer deal without them. These children need to learn, but they learn in a different way than their predecessors. Their learning style is visual-kinetic, characterized by quick reactions and multitasking of perceptions, with the expectation of immediate response and stimulation, of continuous connection with their peers. Naturally, they become bored and uninterested in the classical educational approach in school, where learning is slow, linear and consistent, and their efforts are not always rewarded in a fast manner [1].

Modern education system is more than ever facing severe consequences of the global pandemic that arose in 2020 and many resulting challenges to integrate technology into teaching without fail to provide an immediate, adequate, flexible and effective educational solution. Therefore, our focus turns to the examination of blended learning as a

formal educational practice, a combined approach that breaks the limits between the educational sciences and teaching practices and creates an opportunity to personalize teaching and assessment.

II. DISCUSSION

Blended learning is a scientific and applied educational solution that arouses the interest of many theorists and researchers in the new technologies’ implementation in learning and teaching.

Blended learning emerged within the business training, closely connected with corporate learning, then introduced in higher education [2], and finally has affected language teaching. Therefore, the term itself has been commonly associated with foreign language teaching since the publication of Sharma and Barrett’s book “Blended Learning” was edited [3].

In the beginning, the term symbolized the understanding of blended learning as the implementation of computer technology for delivering online or offline learning materials in traditional learning environment. Many authors argued about the term “blended learning”, however there is no commonly used definition. The term itself is not completely accepted by all of the researchers because it is sometimes replaced by other terms like “hybrid” [4]; “e-learning” [5] or “blended” [6]. Smith and Kurthen try to distinguish some of these terms by using percentages [7].

<i>web-based learning</i>	minimum online materials and activities, such as a curriculum and course’ messages
<i>blended learning</i>	blended teaching whereas some online activities are used instead of traditional ones during a class, but no more than 45 %
<i>hybrid learning</i>	traditional classes “face-to-face” are replaced by online activities in 45-80 %
<i>online learning</i>	more than 80 % of learning materials are online and predominant part of all classroom activities are held online

Dudeney and Hockly also use percentage difference in distinguishing the number of online foreign language courses to blended and courses combined with additional online materials [8]. Despite the differences, it is obvious that many of the terms are synonymous and “blended” in a foreign language teaching is the term largely used for a

combination of face-to-face with computer technology (online and offline learning materials).

Singh and Reid consider blended learning as “a training program using more than one way of delivering learning materials in order to optimize learning outcomes and the cost of education” [9]. The authors do not discuss these delivery methods in their definition, but Valiathan who states that they may include “face-to-face trainings” as well as “e-learning only conducted online” [10] gives a clearer meaning. Reed-Young describes all ways of delivering learning content that differ from those of Valiathan, which “can range from traditional to some individual lessons meeting a teacher or an expert on the subject in the same office or classroom” [11].

Blended teaching in education is defined as “a technology and traditional teaching combined in a flexible approach that takes into account the benefits of online learning and assessment, but also uses other ways to create a comprehensive curriculum and training that can take into account learning outcomes and / or save costs” [6].

The predominant teaching methods in this case are technology and traditional teaching, although interestingly, the “other methods” are not listed. This reference to “other types of methods” depends on the personal interest of the teacher. Blended learning can have three dimensions, which include face-to-face, computers and self-study, which take place in specialized self-study centers, such as distance learning centers located in the same or another building in a particular university. Similar definitions of Banados [6] were given by de Gregorio-Godeo [12] and MacDonald [2].

In contrast to definitions given for blended learning in business and higher education, those related to language teaching and learning are quite precise and concise. Neumeier, for example, describes blended learning in his study as a combination of traditional teaching and “computer-assisted learning in the same environment” [13]. Stracke offers almost the same definition in his study, where “blended is the creation of a special environment that uses traditional teaching and computer-assisted learning” [4]. The “blended” is realized of traditional teaching in the classroom and different stages of independent learning of students in front of a computer. Dudney and Hockley [8], as well as Sharma and Barrett [3], who are probably the most widely recognized researchers on blended learning, offer similar definitions to those of Neumeier [13] and Stracke [4], with the only difference relating to the use of computer - assisted learning. Sharma and Barrett replaced it with “technology”, and said that “blended teaching refers to a language course, which combines elements of the traditional with the appropriate use of technology” [3]. This term is generally used for a wide range of latest technologies, such as the Internet, and interactive whiteboards. Dudney and Hockley also avoid using the term “computer-assisted learning” and replace it with “online” content, where: “blended learning is a mixture of traditional courses with e-learning” [8].

Dewar and Whittington postulate that distinctions identified when introducing blended learning as an educational solution are given by the results obtained in an online survey that shows the reasons: the possibility of blended learning to meet learning styles (80%); individually convenient models (70%); improving learning outcomes (62%); use of costs already made in terms of training resources (59%); reduction of time for classroom activities

(57%). The authors do not explain the content of these reasons and do not provide evidence for the validity of some of these reasons, which may be mere assumptions, for example, about improving the effectiveness of training [14].

There are similarities between the above results and those of Singh and Reed, who a few years before have identified four main benefits of using blended learning, which are: improved learning efficiency, broadening scope, optimizing costs and development time of learning content, optimizing business results (reducing travel costs and achieving learning goals faster) [9]. Sharma and Barrett also refer to those benefits of blended learning related to the costs incurred by the business environment in terms of working time, which is clearly not only been used for training. In addition to the savings made, the authors also emphasize the blended learning courses’ satisfaction, as learners can benefit teaching whenever they want and wherever they are [3]. Saving money is an important stimulus for choosing blended learning in education.

For higher education, Dewar and Whittington, as well as Graham, cite six possible reasons for choosing blended learning: “comprehensive pedagogical interaction”, unrestricted knowledge, communication, self-regulation (i.e. self-control and individual choice of the learner), cost-effectiveness of training, ease of negotiation of teaching materials [14]. Surprisingly, the term “comprehensiveness of teaching interaction” has been used instead of “pedagogy effectiveness”. Probably it is necessary to understand various teaching approaches included in blended learning, not whether they are effective or not. Marsh and co-authors have mentioned the use of blended learning in order to optimize the effectiveness of teaching for large groups [15]. MacDonald considers the ever-expanding classrooms, as well as “changes in demographics and hourly employment growth” as reasons for the implementation of “online technologies” [2].

Sharpe and co-authors examine blended learning in business sector and find “prerequisites for choosing blended learning, which include: flexibility in providing of learning content, support for diverse experiences, improving students’ learning in a global context and effectiveness” [16].

Nicholson has confirmed some findings of Sharpe on the flexibility of blended learning, which gives many learning opportunities [17].

Graham, quoted in Strike, points to three main reasons for the use of blended learning in education, which are: effective pedagogy, flexibility, highly efficient spending [18]-[4]. Efficient teaching is related to the application of blended mode, but most researchers do not discuss largely on the topic. In fact, the focus is on the pedagogy and technology has been used as an additional tool to emphasize the teaching becoming more valuable [19] - [16].

Effective pedagogy refers to blended approach in foreign language teaching, although there are few theoretical opinions on the subject. The most reliable is that “blended learning is a combination of the best of elements taught in a definite course with the benefits of technology in order to achieve better learning outcomes” [20]. In other publications, Sharma and Barrett are more definitive: “We assume that you decide to include technology in language teaching for didactic reasoning only after learning has become effective” [3]. Sharma and Barrett consider that convenience and opportunity according to one's time and at one's pace

determine why blended learning is used in training, but also in language teaching [3].

Interestingly, in a later publication, Hockley have not repeated the major points given by Sharma and Barrett for the use of blended learning in foreign language teaching, but have provided us with three additional ones:

Students' expectations - students today believe that technology should complement their language classes (although this depends largely on the educational context).

Flexibility - students should implement learning into their busy lives, especially for those who already have a professional life.

The expectations of the educational institutions - teachers should offer opportunities for their students to be involved in blended learning context [21] - [3].

After taking the decision to use blended approach, it is necessary to determine the types of blended learning that should be implemented, because according to Reid-Young, there are many models for the business world to choose from [11]. Ultimately, there is "... no optimal blended learning". Which configuration is best can be determined only in terms of pedagogical goals and of course of certain limitations that are presented in a particular learning context. Graham makes the same clarification and emphasizes the "infinite" number of designs concerning the pedagogical decisions and their dependence on the learning context [18]. These statements are particularly important because, in our view, the learning context is the basis on which blended foreign language teaching has been built. Consequently, an in-depth analysis of opportunities and constraints, as well as the identification of key motivators for change, are crucial parameters to be considered before proceeding to the design of blended foreign language teaching.

The various opportunities create many issues and countless possibilities for teachers who design mixed courses.

Valiathan has identified three blended learning models that are emerging in the business environment, namely:

- the acquisition of skills,
- aimed at the learners' attitudes,
- based on competence building [10].

Reid-Young consider three more "typical" examples: a combination of separate modules, a reference-based model for blended learning, and a model for pre-research and assessment of blended learning opportunities [11]. There is no clear difference between these models and, they have no a direct impact on learning and teaching.

Dewar and Whittington revised the Valiathan model, but ultimately consent with Hocutt's ideas to blended learning [14] - [10] – [22]. Instead of giving the components of blended model, Hocutt, from different perspective suggests four ways the components should interact [22]. Dewar and Whittington set them out as follows:

1. Blended learning components interact.
2. The components are constant in terms of language, style and techniques.
3. Components should not be multidirectional (which should be interpreted as meaning, they can also be optional or mandatory).
4. Components should follow smoothly and consistently [14].

Graham, like Reid-Young, previously cited, defines blended learning at the course level (in addition to other levels, namely activities, programs, institutions), arguing that it is one of the most commonly used types of teaching [18]. However, Reid-Young states "course level leads to a combination of different types of activities that are completely different in traditional and blended teaching" [11]. Reid-Young suggests students meet during traditional classes if it is possible, which is extremely important when there are objective preconditions for the lack of face-to-face training. Both authors believe that this type of blended learning is widely implemented in education [18]- [11]. Graham's definition of a "course model" is the most commonly used in foreign language teaching as well.

Graham believes that a course designer should consider six key issues before creating a blended course:

1. The role of learner-teacher interaction. To what extent the traditional component within the blended course should be used? For language teaching it would be more important to emphasize on this element of the course, which is essential in mastering pronunciation and speech.
2. The role of student's regulated learning. It is particularly important for choosing the specific type of blended teaching, especially when it is implemented in education courses.
3. Support and methods. How teachers, trainers and students are supported in learning environment? How to use necessary and adequate support?
4. Find equality between innovation and the effectiveness of teaching.
5. Appropriateness - the materials should be appropriate for the local and different audience?
6. Social inequality – is there a nonconformity between generations and is there an opportunity for blended learning models to train those at the lowest level of the socio-economic area? [18]

Foreign language learning has always presented challenges for different people in various contexts. The motives for learning a foreign language are so diverse as the ways different people learn new words, new grammar rules, listen, read and speak. Many methods and approaches are often combined in foreign language teaching, as well as various technologies for influencing learners in order to optimize the practical possibilities for learning the target language. Therefore, there is no correct way to learn a language, just as there is no particular way to learn it. It is obvious that some optimal conditions for effective language learning should be created regarding a set of components, which are required for an efficient learning environment?

Effective language teaching practices have been identified and characterized in a number of researches, as follows:

- students deal with the level of stress and anxiety;
- the students' autonomy has been maintained and supported.

Foreign language teaching is still traditional in classrooms, so the language teacher based on his/her pedagogical experience knows that achieving the "most optimal" condi-

tions creates a serious challenge in different foreign language contexts. Surrounded by speakers of their native language, students rarely have the opportunity to enter the world of the target language despite the efforts of a number of educators to introduce communicative language tasks and activities in the classrooms.

The teacher can face students with preferences for individual learning, coming from different schools. In each classroom, there are students with different abilities and learning goals or styles. An inappropriate task should be a significant challenge in this context. Teachers know that if the task language level is low, some students do not improve their skills and knowledge. If the task is difficult, others may simply give up. Tasks may not motivate those students if they do not affect their individual interests and learning styles, and motivation is essential for language teaching.

In the classroom teachers are aware of the need to enable their students to practice the language in various contexts, but this is sometimes not possible due to limitations in the class schedule.

Language teachers not only meet the needs of their learners, but also create a learning environment that closely resembles a real language context. A number of resources and tools are used in order to achieve the “optimal” learning environment. Recorders, video players, magazines and books, the Internet and language labs provide diverse access to learning practice. Different types of activities can also be used, such as group work and pair work, collaborative learning, as well as self-study in order to engage students in communicative language practice.

Language teachers have always used a “mix” of teaching techniques, technologies and approaches to provide sufficiently effective learning environment for students. Blended learning is not a new concept. The novelties are the variety of different learning opportunities and the interactive learning environments to support learning and teaching. The “expectations” of students to use technologies for learning are new and unusual as well.

Blended teaching, which is a mixture of various environments and resources, has been assured of the potential tools for more effective learning and teaching [23].

The reference to blended teaching should imply the continuous use of traditional teaching as a key context of learning experience, enriched and improved through the implementation of many teaching and learning technologies. This technology’s integration should have happened by the obligatory support of the teacher and his/her work for achieving learning objectives and needs of all students.

Blended language teaching is still a relatively new concept of its use, but recent studies have shown that implemented “adequately”, blended teaching has the potential to significantly improve learning experience and students’ achievement [4]. In an online survey of 300 lecturers from 36 countries who practice computer-assisted language learning, Ruthven-Stewart found that 98% of them agreed that the main role of the computer was “to complement teaching in the classroom” [24].

The major points of blended language teaching effectiveness have been identified:

- individualized learning;
- personalized training assistance;
- independent and collaborative learning;

- students' involvement in education process and goals;
- a variety of learning styles implemented;
- a place where the target language is practiced outside the classroom;
- less stressful environment for the target language;
- flexible learning, anytime or anywhere, achieving the learning goals and meeting the needs of students;
- valuable and necessary learning skills in the twenty-first century have been acquired.

Teachers have always been using a variety of tools to improve students’ learning, for example, the Word software for experiments with collaborative writing, self-assessment, and collaborative assessment. Students are encouraged to practice synchronous communication in order to master conversational skills in forums on topics that are interesting and relevant. The Internet has been used for researches carried out within project-based teaching. Some students create blogs for practicing writing and engaging a specific audience. These have been used as diaries to promote reflective practices and to help master skills and learning strategies.

Learning environment can assure students of different ways and new approaches to learning, thus allowing various learning styles as well as greater diversity and scope of language acquisition. These environments complement and support traditional teaching. Undoubtedly, all education in the near future will be supported by digital or web-based flexible solutions in the policy of education institutions.

The most important goal for an effective design of blended teaching has always been finding the most efficient and flexible combination of specialized learning, education contexts and specific pedagogy purposes. The focus is not on choosing the “exact” or “best” and “innovative” teaching, as opposed to “traditional” one, but on creating an environment that functions as “a whole” [13].

The theory and practice of mixing learning methods and approaches are assured of various components combined in a common conception. Blended teaching has the potential to provide in-depth and meaningful learning, rather than simply mixing information technologies with traditional teaching. Considering the implementation of blended teaching in foreign language practice, there can be no single perfect blend, nor be a formula for “good” blend of methods and techniques. However, there are a number of important factors and components that are essential in achieving an “effective” combination.

It is crucial that different components and methods should complement each other. The discrepancy between them can lead to confusion and dissatisfaction on the part of both students and teachers.

The basic point of establishing the effectiveness of blended teaching is the identification of the students’ achievements, the determination of their needs and the distinction of diverse and possible components that have been available to the teacher. It is then necessary to determine how expected learning outcomes and students’ expectations can be realized in definite learning contexts.

Interactivity and multimodality are crucial to building learners' confidence in the language learning. Teachers should carefully and responsibly evaluate teaching materials and resources, as well as software and learning environments, and use only those that are methodologically accurate

and effective. Students love and use different technologies and social media. Teachers should vary technologies used in their teaching so that they meet the expectations and students' skills.

In blended context, where technology-assisted teaching and self-learning is essential for effectiveness, three important levels of support are identified: teaching, interactive and technological.

Teaching level of support

Students deal with different grammar rules and word constructions in language acquisition and learning on their own. During the lesson, the teacher must be ready to answer any questions that might have been asked. This could be done through the online forums created for the various activities in which students could be invited to ask questions that could be very difficult for them to ask in face-to-face. By maintaining active interaction between individual group members through forums rather than e-mail (which only encourages interaction between learners and teachers), other group members could be encouraged to answer their colleagues' questions. This provides significant satisfaction for the person answering the question, and the idea the teacher is not the "source of all knowledge" creating a sense of support for the peer community as a whole.

Interactive level of support

The classroom's interaction creates an excellent environment to support students who may have difficulty with a term test or assignment where they may feel confused or lost, especially when working alone at home. The students' blogs and the reports of learners' progress, available in many virtual learning management systems are some opportunities for the teacher to help any student who is feeling isolated and to support those ones who are often neglected during class.

Technological level of support

Technological support is especially important for both teachers and students who need it to feel comfortable in the new and challenging experience called "blended teaching".

Students cannot be "taught" - they can only receive help and support for learning. In a learner-centered classroom, teacher's role is to help and encourage them to develop their skills, to give knowledge and advice. In the classroom, teacher and the students are working together as a team. The teacher's role has always been central in very well organized and engaging environment for learning. He remains a leader in blended language teaching as well. The teacher continues to encourage and motivate, guide and monitor progress, give feedback, increase confidence and maintain motivation [25].

The teacher's role in combining methods and techniques should be estimated, as the use of effective technology often requires training and support for oneself. Teachers should use learning strategies that are quite different from they have been accustomed to in traditional learning environments. For example, in traditional context learning activities are usually structured and adapted according to the individual and normatively set criteria of the teacher and the institution. Blended teaching creates greater interdependence between needs, styles, and ways of self-regulated learning. So, teacher should help students in taking responsibility of their own learning.

III. CONCLUSION

Foreign language blended teaching has allowed the pedagogy goals, tasks, as well as students' time and results to be adapted to the language areas that are most suitable for traditional teaching, and to provide the flexibility to choose those components that meet the needs and skills. Students' computer skills are well developed, so the use of computer technology is usually not great challenge when introduced to blended environment.

Foreign language blended courses aim to support self-directed learning, the right motivation for students to face their computer outside the classroom. There has always been a need to find ways to create a friendly, social online environment that is essential for successful language e-learning.

The didactic value of blended language learning has been seen in the opportunity to allow a higher degree of students' independence in foreign languages 'acquisition. Therefore, the online component of blended teaching, which allows students to study whenever and wherever they want, offers them huge flexibility in terms of time and space.

Blended teaching cannot be considered only as a methodological approach or pedagogical alternative to the online or classroom environment, but also as a flexible continuum of different environments and resources for language learning. This education paradigm offers different ways of mixing, types of learning, learning opportunities and environments that are potentially limitless. The majority of factors and prerequisites that need to be determined in achieving appropriate combination that is suitable for meeting specific students' needs should not be misunderstood. Therefore, the choice of foreign language blended teaching is an effective alternative of traditional one increasing students' desire to learn, and to afford the multicomponent nature of language acquisition. Blended teaching become a pedagogical responsibility that is considered to have a positive impact on both learning outcomes and motivation to learn.

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