Blended Learning: A Potential Approach to Promote Learning Outcomes

Adem Daskan[1] & Yunus Yildiz[2]

[1,2]English Language Teaching Department, Faculty of Education, Tishk International University, Erbil, Iraq
Correspondence: Adem Daskan, Tishk International University, Erbil, Iraq.
Email: adem.daskan@tiu.edu.iq

Abstract: Blended learning, an educational approach which integrates traditional and online learning, has the potential not only to deliver a course in a useful way but also create an effective learning environment. The inclusion of technology into classroom instruction provides easy accessibility to a wide variety of resources, flexibility, pedagogical effectiveness, learner autonomy, stress-free learning environment, engagement with course contents, immediate feedback, self-evaluation and more time to interact with learners. Through combining online materials and traditional classroom instruction, blended learning can facilitate learning and help achieving educational goals. This paper explores the benefits of blended learning to help learners promote learning outcomes.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Flexibility, Engagement, Collaboration, Autonomy

1. Introduction

Blended learning is integrating traditional and online learning. While learners conduct a part of their learning in a classical educational environment, they conduct the other part through online environment. It not only provides opportunities for learners to attend classes in a teacher-led classroom setting but also allows them to have online learning experiences. Rather than simply adding computers to learning settings, blended learning involves mixing instructional technology with traditional teaching for the purpose of constructing a harmonious effect of learning. The inclusion of technology in learning facilitates achieves educational goals (Welker & Berardino, 2006) because the use of educational media support development of learners. Learners stand for a better chance of making better progress when teachers employ multiple methods of instruction to deliver their courses.

This approach is also known as hybrid-learning and mixed-mode learning. In blended learning the most effective online tools are utilized to improve the efficiency of teacher-led classroom. In hybrid learning on the other hand, rather than technology the major focus is on the most useful way to deliver a course. Although it can be daunting to shift from classroom setting to online learning, blended learning holds an important place in education to keep learning going by combining online materials and traditional classroom methods.

2. Literature Review

Blended learning is an approach which integrates e-learning with all enhancements of technological devices with traditional learning to enhance classroom interaction (Thorne, 2003). Niemiec and Otte (2005) defined blended learning as "the integration of online with face-to-face instruction in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner; and not just a combination (addition) of online with face-to-face but a trade-off (replacement) of face-to-face time with online activity (or vice versa)". McGee and Reis (2012) proposes a comprehensive definition of blended learning as:

> Blended course designs involve instructor and learners working together in mixed delivery modes, typically face-to-face and technology mediated, to accomplish learning outcomes that are pedagogically supported through assignments, activities, and assessments as appropriate for a given mode and which bridge course environments in a manner meaningful to the learner (p. 9).

Much of the literature focuses on teacher, online resources and implementation of instruction. From the definitions it is possible to conclude that blended learning combines face-to-face and online learning. In addition, a substantial amount of learning is conducted online by means of interaction. Bersin et al. (2003) support the use of different elarning media to create an effective learning environment and argue that:

> Blended learning in order to be more effective should take in consideration all educational media that is available inside the classroom, training on the network, the already decisions placed, the available videos, simulations in addition to other means such as telephone communications (p 254).

Both traditional and online learning approaches have strengths. While traditional learning provides benefits in terms of active learning, interpersonal relationships, and face to face interaction (Mart, 2013a, 2013b), online learning improves self-paced learning. If the strengths of these two approaches are integrated in a pedagogically well-designed plan, the engagement of learners in learning increases to a large extent. That teachers and learners are working together through using mixed delivery instructions provides an ample amount of opportunity to foster learning outcomes. Furthermore, if this delivery is supported by interaction, activities and assignments learners are offered favourable learning conditions. Put the matter in another way, blended learning through using online and face-to-face modes of delivery which are reinforced with appropriate learning tasks help learners develop their learning.

In blended learning, learners are given specific tasks based on their abilities. In this way, while doing these tasks learners develop skills for themselves. These tasks which learners do outside the classroom enable them to develop an understanding of how to learn by themselves. In particular, for those learners who cannot learn in the classroom, online tasks given by their teachers provide them benefits to increase their involvement in learning because it should be borne in mind that "the most successful learning takes place outside the classroom (Jones, 1995, p. 228). Blended learning is useful in that it allows learners to personalize their learning through tech-driven tools. Hints and tasks given to learners who cannot learn fast support and motivate learners to improve their knowledge in certain topics.
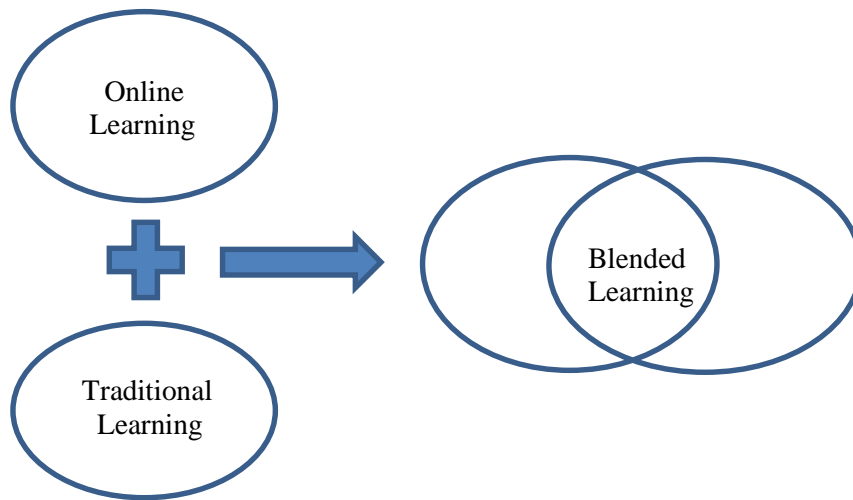
Figure 1: Blended learning is integrating online and traditional learning

Blended learning provides learners an adequate number of benefits and among them "accessibility, pedagogical effectiveness, and course interaction" (Johnson, 2002, p.5) come to the forefront. One of the most significant advantages of blended learning is accessibility to a wide variety of resources. The appropriate use of resources serve in a supplementary role on overall improvement in learning. Learners can access to the learning resources not only from their classrooms but also homes. Wingard (2004) argues that getting access to learning resources has a motivating factor; thus, encourages learners to acquire more knowledge and points out that:

> They like to have the ability to access course materials anytime, anyplace, and are positive about the convenience and flexibility this provides them because blended learning courses help in providing them with the flexibility they need to juggle jobs, school and family (p. 27).

Another advantage of the approach is flexibility it offers for both teachers and learners (Gedik, Kiraz, & Ozden, 2012). While it allows teachers to use a variety of different instructional methods, it encourages learners to understand the information with ease. As multiple methods of instruction is employed in blended learning, learners demonstrate better learning outcomes. As each student has a preference for learning a certain way the use of multiple methods by teachers during instruction help learners have a better understanding of topics.

The inclusion of technology into classroom instruction allows teachers more time to interact with learners in the classroom to check on their progress. Teachers do not need to spend a great deal of time delivering their lectures which frees them up to spend more time with their students. Blended learning can increase the collaboration between teachers and learners. Collaborative tools also allow learners to connect with each other and trigger discussions. Learners stand a better chance of improving their communication by means of activities done both in the classroom and online platform.

Learners today are surrounded by technological tools. Technology is used in every aspect of our lives; in particular the new generation is growing up with technology. When teachers perform activities, learners engage more easily as they are familiar with technological devices. It goes without saying that, access to resources from anywhere provides a good opportunity for learners to develop their level of knowledge (Graziano & Feher, 2016). Chen and Jones (2007) also highlight the contributions of blended learning to deep understanding of topics being covered. Learners need to complete activities and assignments so that they can move further. All these materials give an opportunity to learners to engage with course contents.

That learners can access to materials at any time improves their time efficiency and encourages them to learn at their own pace (Shand & Glassett Farrelly, 2017). Learners learn in different ways. Some learners learn first while others learn slowly; therefore, supporting classroom teaching with online activities leads to learning at their own pace. It is important for language learners to be responsible for their own learning (Yildiz & Hur, 2020). Then, blended learning helps learners develop learner autonomy. Learners need to control over their learning to make better progress; in the same vein, teachers should endeavour to develop autonomy in their learners.

Blended learning has the potential to reduce stress of learners by offering them different choices. Also eLearning platforms are interesting for learners because they use games, animations, pictures and videos. These mediums create fun and increase interest of learners. Another benefit of blended learning is the environment it creates in which learners do not disturb each other and make complaints. These serious issues may impede the efficiency of learning; however, online learning environment can reduce these problems.

Assessment plays a central role in the development of learners. However, in traditional teaching assessment does not take place very often because they are time-consuming. In the same vein, teachers cannot provide immediate feedback. Online assessments in blended learning can be held very often and students are provided immediate feedback which help them with self-evaluation. Learners consider their weaknesses and strengths and set new goals for improvement. Similarly, teachers can track progress of their students and have an idea about their development.

3. Conclusion

The ultimate goal of education is to develop competencies of learners. Therefore, blended learning is a paramount effective solution in education, especially in this time of tech-based life. A tailored blended learning implementation plays a key role on improving learner achievement. It is important to emphasize that the inclusion of technological tools have become more viable today. The integration of technology into traditional learning can lead to improved educational outcomes. Furthermore, learners of today are persistently immersed in technology; thus, instruction without technological devices cannot meet their educational needs.

A serious criticism blended learning has received is that teachers are not needed if learners become autonomous. However, the role of teachers in educating, informing and facilitating makes it clear that learners cannot become autonomous without teacher encouragement. Teachers' role is inevitable to take students into success zone and provide them to become independent learners (Yildiz & Celik, 2020). In other words, learners cannot develop learning skills without teacher support and impetus.

Other criticisms come from Hofmann (2011) who states that blended learning entails the successful use of technology. It is true that the ability of teachers and learners should be ensured to employ blended learning.

Another criticism by Hoffman is the lack of interactivity online resources offer. Teachers need to select online tasks and activities which emphasize interactivity. Simply instructing without interactive activities might fail to result in better outcomes. In spite of the criticisms, blended learning has the potential to improve learning, promote better comprehension, develop autonomous learning, foster confidence, enhance collaborative learning, advance motivation, and expand interaction. A well-designed blended learning environment can make difference in learning.

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