

## **Reading Activities in Blended Learning: Recommendations for University Language Preparatory Course Teachers**

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**Abstract:** Technology has become an inseparable part of our lives in all its spheres: home, workplace, leisure, as well as education. For this reason, integration of technology into the educational process not only helps learners to acquire the required material better but also to prepare them for the real-life promoting the development of the 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, working in teams, use of digital appliances, etc. The current study aims to provide practical recommendations and ideas for the development of reading skills of university language preparatory course students. This research is believed to be useful for the language teachers and curriculum/syllabus designers.

**Keywords:** Blended Learning, Educational Technology, Reading Skills, Reading Tasks and Activities

### **1. Introduction**

Education has been continuously under the influence of changes in all sphere of human life throughout the history of mankind. The needs of the job market have always been the cause of transformations of what, how, and when is taught in the educational institutions on all levels, starting from primary school and finishing universities and life-long learning of every individual. Some of the changes in the education caused temporary impact, while others have demonstrated resistance to time and changing needs. Nowadays, computer or digital technologies are viewed as a prospective candidate for staying in education for a long time (Cullingford & Haq, 2016).

Since the invention of computers, the ways and forms of using it in education have developed at an increasing speed. Computers, pads, telephones, etc. are believed to empower distance education and increase the possibility of learning for wider populations, as well as “a wider range of teaching functions and a higher quality of learning; lower costs; greater student control; more interaction and feedback for students” (Bates, 2014, p. 223).

From the very beginning of the implementation of the digital technologies into education many different ideas and approaches have been suggested and later tested by the educators and researchers, such as e-learning, mobile-learning, computer-assisted instruction, digital game-based learning, blended learning,

etc. All these innovative methods seek for one single purpose to improve the existing pedagogy to make learning more flexible and accessible for everybody.

## 2. Defining Blended Learning

Blended Learning (BL) as a teaching and learning method for the first time was mentioned in the academic and educational literature twenty years ago (Khodabandelou, Ali, Jalil, & Daud, 2016). Initially, studies about BL were focused on its effectiveness against traditional teaching and learning. However, in the recent researches put more attention on the practices, ways of application, proportions of the blend, and its effects on the learners' learning performance (Li, Wu, Dai, & Chen, 2017).

The word blend itself has the meaning of mixing two or more things together. The same meaning is applied in the educational context - a mixture of two or more components of teaching methods, approaches, techniques, etc. The meaning of the term Blended Learning, as the name of the innovative method of instruction, is usually defined as a mixture or hybrid of traditional face-to-face (F2F) way of teaching with instruction via digital applications outside the classroom (Wallace, 2015; Hilliard, 2015; Lalima & Dangwal, 2017, The Glossary of Education Reform, 2014).

A more detailed definition of BL was given by Horn, Staker, & Christensen (2015), who explain it as a formal education program during which a learner receives education via a blend of three components: online – with at least partial control over the time, pace, place, etc. by the students; sessions supervised by a teacher/instructor away from home, e.g at school; and individualized modalities of the program for each student to provide the attainment of the designed learning goals. The proportion of each component or the BL model, however, can differ from school to school and even from class to class (Linton, 2018).

Cerna & Svobodova (2018) compare BL with Hybrid Learning, which can be used interchangeably, emphasizing the necessity of blending of the teaching and learning components according to the needs of a particular student or a group of students, where the focus is not on the integration of technology into learning process, but on making a course more flexible for diverse learner abilities, demands and preferences.

Lalima & Dangwal (2017) give more a comprehensive definition of BL. They explain that BL is more than a mixture of face-to-face and online teaching and learning, and it consists of 13 components – a menu for a blend:

1. Face-to-face teaching;
2. Student's work with course content, such as printed material, online and offline resources;
3. Pair and group work;
4. Group discussions and brainstorming;
5. Use of e-library / digital library;
6. Virtual classrooms;
7. Online testing and evaluation (including immediate feedback by peers and instructors);
8. E-tuition – a guidance in cyber space;
9. Educational blogs;
10. Webinars;

11. YouTube lectures;
12. Learning through video and audio recordings, such as animated videos or documentaries;
13. Virtual Laboratories.

Thus, it is obvious that the definition of the blend and its components can vary from one school to another, but the purpose remains the same – to make learning modalities more flexible and appropriate according to the needs and capabilities of the learners.

### **3. Blended Learning in EFL**

Language is the most natural communication device that has been used by people from the very beginning of the history of humanity. We use language in written and oral form to transmit and receive information. Even though the major purpose remains the same, with the development of technology, the ways and formats of language we use change. Consequently, the methods and approaches to teaching and learning language also should change in order to meet the needs and requirements of the today's world.

Nowadays, language learners, especially English language learners, are expected to be able to use language in different contexts: real-time communication or face-to-face interaction, reading a variety of sources, listening to the speakers of different dialects and accents of English, writing various types and styles of texts, as well as communication in the virtual reality. To be ready to do so, it is essential to implement activities close to real-life situations or at least to imitate the reality in order to prepare students to use the language appropriately (Hall, 2016).

Stanley (2013) suggests language instructors to start from finding the answers to a number of questions trying to understand why to use the technology, who is/are the best audience / consumers of it, what are the most beneficial ways, time, and places to use technologies, etc. Having found the answers to these questions will help educators and learners to get the maximum benefit of available technological appliances. Stanley also emphasises the importance of always having a second plan or a back-up plan in case the technology does not work as planned.

Claypole (2016) believes that in BL teacher should play the role of a model, so, in order to create an effective blend in EFL/ESL teaching should be “learner-centered but teacher-driven” (p. 27). The focus should be put on learning the language and creativity, not on the enhancement of the learner's technological skills. The technology improves, develops, and changes so much the applications and tools that teachers use. For example, what teachers used five years ago may not be applicable any more. The general principles of using technology to improve learners' language skills remain unchanged, while the devices and programs continue to change day by day (ibid). Thus, the teachers need first of all know the general principles and master step by step the new devices.

In different academic context (country, institution) the application of blended learning may vary. For example, in the UK (the study involves 7 universities) it is, according to Sharpe et al. (2006), it is mostly applied as supplementary resource for material presentation. Course notes, for instance, that are available online, help students, who can follow the class attentively instead of being distracted by taking detailed notes. Power Point Presentations are especially important for international students whose listening skills

are not so good to follow the course only by listening. The rationale of blended learning application, to their mind, deals with:

- the flexibility of provision,
- large group teaching,
- out-of-class activities
- promoting associative (word – picture, sound - text) and situative learning (creating the authentic-like environment related to the topic).

On the other hand, in Croatia, according to Žuvic-Butorac et al. (2011), BL is mostly used for practice purposes. Students at University of Rijeka not only prefer blended learning to the completely online-realized courses, but also especially value teacher engagement in the fulfilment of tasks online.

Okada and Sakamoto (2015) discuss BL application to reading skills' development. According to them, the EFL instructor can (1) hold quizzes and tests, (2) upload the reading materials that the students need, (3) give and obtain feedback via e-portfolios, and (4) spontaneously modify the lesson plan during the F2F class. On the other hand, the students can (1) communicate with their teacher whenever they need, (2) share materials, (3) send their requests or messages on their learning difficulties through social media and (3) are supported by peers and teacher in their out-of-classroom language learning activities.

Dudeny and Hockly (2007) speak about the following pedagogical considerations of BL implementation in EFL:

- delivery mode (what is the ration between the traditional and digital learning);
- materials and tasks design;
- teacher - student relationships and roles.

Khan (2005), on the other hand, mentions the following factors:

- institutional,
- pedagogical,
- technological,
- interface,
- evaluation,
- management,
- resource support,
- and ethical.

The institutional policies decide how much (if at all) blended learning is required. If it is required, the institution has to provide the relevant facilities (internet access or Wi-Fi). The pedagogical factor deals with teacher ability to use BL, and the technological – with how the classrooms and the students are equipped in order to carry out the BL. The interface component deals with using BL in online or offline regime. The formative and summative evaluation may be traditional, blended or completely online. Resources maybe educational (compatible with the textbook, if they exist or independent, selected and modified to become compatible) or authentic (any textual – auditory, visual or audiovisual materials

available on the internet. The ethical side deals with plagiarism issues, equality of students, and cultural appropriateness of educational materials and activities.

In order to plan blended EFL teaching, Khan (2005) recommends holding contents, learners' (age, educational level, target language skills' level) / course goal analysis, develop instructional and blending strategies. In EFL we can use technologies for material presentation, drills, story-telling support, games, role play/simulation, collaboration, and discussion. When used out-of-class, blending can be self-paced.

#### **4. Advantages and Disadvantages of Blended Learning**

According to Saltan (2017), blended learning better prepares future teachers to their professional activities (where they will need to apply blended teaching). He held an interview with 154 newly graduated Faculty of Arts and Sciences students. One of the questions dealt with the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning. The respondents named depth and flexibility of communication as the reason why they like F2F classes and saving of time, convenient regime of studies, possibility to obtain feedback continuously and learning autonomy as the reasons of choosing online studies. Some students mentioned they are more motivated when they study F2F, while others – while they study online. The combination of the two, on the other hand, enables to move more work on language to the online regime and to concentrate on the communication in class.

Bemposta-Rosende, García-García and Escribano-Otero (2011) mention the “flexibility in terms of time, space and location, the decentralization of knowledge and the possibility of adapting knowledge to student requirements” (p.53), also the objectivity of assessment and the continuous feedback as the major advantages of online learning. While the F2F learning is often teacher-centered, online learning is normally student-centered. The limitless materials are also the advantages of the online learning. Both e-learning and blended learning are active by nature, while F2F learning may not be active for all students. As for the disadvantages, they also coincide for e-learning and b-learning: lack of teachers' and students' technical skills, lack of teachers' knowledge of the pedagogical approaches to technology-assisted learning, the quality of equipment / internet connection / software, and their price.

Obviously, some students prefer F2F learning, while others – e-learning. The application of blended learning will enable teachers to satisfy (to a certain degree) both categories of learning. By applying more than one channel of information and communication BL satisfies more students than either F2F or e-learning (Knoll & Berge, 2007).

According to Fadde and Vu (2013), blended learning decreases the teacher's knowledge transmission function and increases his educational management function. Both e-learning and blended learning permit to have more than one teacher (including international specialists, which increase the level of education) in the classroom and increase the number of communication partners.

Language is the tool through which we deliver and exchange our ideas, feelings, desires, beliefs, thoughts, courses of action and many other types of information. Even though language is not a natural phenomenon, each society depends very much on language for its existence and survival. As nowadays many people staying in different parts of the globe want to communicate, it is hardly possible, even with technical means, to carry all this communication orally as it would take too much time. This is why

newspapers, books, emails, text messages, and many other written sources of information play a crucial role in communicating various types of information among people from different cultural backgrounds, education level, age, gender, beliefs, etc. (Raman, 2004). In this case, reading skill comes to the foreground as one of the most important communication skills. Reading is one of the language skills that is largely concerned with the communication of ideas. The major goals to be gained from reading are meaning, comprehension, understanding the ideas and their communication (Russell, 1951).

According to Roe, Smith and Burns (2011), reading is a complex activity that can be considered as having two components: reading process and reading product. They view the reading process from a variety of closely connected aspects, such as “sensory and perceptual, sequential, experiential, thinking, learning, association, affective, and constructive”, the combination of which serves the production of reading (p. 1). Roe et al. also state that the blend of the reading process components may vary from one reader to another, and good communication between the writer and the reader depends on the harmony of the aspects involved in reading interaction. In this sense, the reading product is “the result of comprehension of the written message” (p.1).

Consequently, reading is a two-way communication that involves receiving ideas from others, as well as giving ideas to them. Reading is the communication of thoughts and emotions from a writer to a reader, which causes the reader's own understanding of the writer's ideas by means of a written text. During the reading process, readers create their own meaning by integrating their prior knowledge with the information presented in the text.

Nowadays readers can reach the material written many years ago, that gives an opportunity to communicate not only with the contemporary writers, but also with the ancient ones. Information about great discoveries, historical events, traditions, culture, and a lot of other important data need to be passed from one person to another, from one generation to another by word of mouth. All this huge amount of knowledge is available to those who can read.

Today reading is one of the major means of communication. A note from a victim may tell the police who committed the crime, a user manual describes how the product must be used, a travel guide gives information about places to visit, a leaflet from a medicine box gives instructions of how to take the tablet, a text message from a friend tells us about a forthcoming visit, etc. Reading is the way many people share their insights, sorrows, worries, feelings, and joys. It is very difficult to imagine our lives without this vital means of communication.

As for the importance of reading in English for communication, it is necessary to mention that the English language has become the language of the internet, where the majority of websites are in English. EFL reading skills are necessary to use the limitless possibilities of the internet, because, according to W3Techs (n.d.), 53.8% of contents on the internet is in English, there are eight languages which are responsible for 2 or more percent of the internet content, all other languages are responsible for less. Georgian, for example, are responsible for 0.015%, while Turkish – for 1.2%. And the internet nowadays is essential for self-education and formal education, business, personal relationships and entertainment.

Another important moment to be mentioned is the importance of reading in English for educational purposes. A lot of students nowadays study abroad, where the language of communication (at least between students and teaching staff of the University) is English. As education is unimaginable without reading, it is clear that the ability to communicate by the means of reading is essential.

From another point of view, the main purpose of language learning is communication, and reading, as one of the basic language skills (together with speaking, writing, and listening), plays an important (if not the major) role in developing students' knowledge of the language (first and second). Thus, reading nowadays is used not only as the source of information, but also as the way of enriching students' vocabulary, grammar, speaking, writing, etc. (Rivers, 1981). For example, there are a lot of students all over the world who study a foreign language in countries not speaking that language, where reading has become the most popular way of learning and practicing their language skills.

The advantage of reading skills is the fact that once they are developed, learners can improve them on their own without further help from teachers. With the help of good reading skills, learners can increase the knowledge about and the understanding of the culture, mentality, and values of the speakers of the language, as well as the huge amount of knowledge and contributions to many fields of human life.

Another advantage of written word, compared to spoken, is its permanence. Spoken language is temporary and fleeting, as once a sentence is spoken, it vanishes (unless it is recorded). That is why written materials' "life span" is longer, so readers have an opportunity to return to the text again and again, if necessary (Brown, 2001).

The peculiarities of reading and its influence on our everyday life emphasize the importance of acquiring good reading skills for being able to communicate in today's globalizing world. The quality and effectiveness of communication depend on the way people communicate, where the role of reading is undoubtedly vital.

It is widely recognized that the quality of native-language reading skills (their rate and the accuracy and depth of comprehension) has a strong positive impact on academic achievement in other subjects (Bamidele, 2017; Delgadova, 2015; Nyarko, Kugbey, & Kofi, 2018). In fact, contemporary education cannot be done without good reading and writing skills. Lukhele (2013), for example, studied the impact of attitudes to reading, reading and vocabulary skills and academic performance. The study was carried out based on attitude questionnaire and reading test. 84 future teachers from South Africa participated. It was found that reading skill level has a positive significant relation with the attitude towards reading and the academic performance of the students was also significantly related with the level of reading skills. Ntereke and Ramoroka (2017) have shown that the quality of reading skills is important for academic achievement not only at school, but also at university. Among the 51 students who took part in their research those students who did well in the reading comprehension test also had higher points in all taught courses. Arshad and his colleagues (2016) came to similar conclusions with 400 agricultural students of four universities in Pakistan.

EFL reading is also very important for academic achievement of those students who study at international programs at home or especially abroad. Hirano (2015), Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbaum and Keen (2015), as well as Young and Schartner (2014) studied through interviews, questionnaires and

observations the problems that learners from non-English-speaking countries encounter while studying in the USA and the UK. On the other hand, some countries, such as Malaysia, are providing international education in English. Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016) investigated the problems arising with international students from Arab countries due to the lack of reading skills. These difficulties are largely related to the fact that, first, higher education (and especially, self-education) is mostly done through reading, and, second, many of them have poorer listening skills compared to reading skills, so, unless what was heard during a class, was not supported by what was read (on the slides during the class and in the articles and books at home), their learning becomes too difficult if possible at all.

### 5. Academic Reading Tasks in Blended Teaching and Learning

Reading is an important component of academic development. The success at higher education institutions very much depends on the students' involvement in reading of the course materials. Lectures may not include all the details that students are expected to understand and acquire in the field. It is essential to develop not only students' ability to read and comprehend the reading texts in the classroom, but also to become autonomous readers outside the classroom. That is why the development of academic reading skills must be included in the goals of the university language preparatory program.

Based on the level of student's language proficiency and the desired learning outcomes, the teacher can distribute the blend between face-to-face and off-set instruction for reading a specific text. The inventory provided in the table below (Table 1) is designed for EFL teachers, and can be used for selection of the reading activities on pre-, while-, and post-stages and the digital applications to promote blend.

Table 1: Reading tasks and activities distribution of blend inventory

Reading stage	Task Examples	Face-to-face	Off-set	Examples of Online/Offline applications
Pre-reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guessing the topic of the text using illustrations, tables, graphics or headlines.</li> </ul>			Edmodo poll/quiz, Google Docs, Google Blog, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A group discussion/brainstorming about the predicted topic.</li> </ul>			Edmodo poll/quiz, Google Docs, Google Blog, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trying to infer what the text will say.</li> </ul>			Edmodo poll/quiz, Google Docs, Google Blog, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writing questions that can be answered according to the text.</li> </ul>			Edmodo Poll, Google blog, Pear deck, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exploring key vocabulary.</li> </ul>			Google Docs

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflecting on or reviewing information from the previously read texts in light of the topic of the new text.</li> </ul>			Google Docs, Wikis, Google Blog, YouTube, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Watching a video or listening to a recorded material connected to the topic.</li> </ul>			YouTube, Podcast, VOA, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Other</li> </ul>			
While-reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scanning for some specific items of information (dates, numbers, names, etc.)</li> </ul>			Microsoft Office (Word, PDF, PPT + Find function), online resources, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Skimming for gist.</li> </ul>			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Answering questions.</li> </ul>			Edmodo Poll, Blog, Google Docs/Classroom, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examining emotions and attitudes of key characters.</li> </ul>			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Completing the sentences using information from the text.</li> </ul>			Edmodo poll/quiz, Google Docs, Google Blog, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Filling gaps in a table, map, picture, etc.</li> </ul>			Edmodo poll/quiz, Google Docs, Google Blog, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating students' own questions (based on the text) and asking each other.</li> </ul>			Edmodo poll/quiz, Google Docs, Google Blog, Flip Grid, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determining sources of difficulty and seeking clarification.</li> </ul>			Google Hangouts, Edmodo Messaging, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writing down predictions of what will come next</li> </ul>			Edmodo poll/quiz, Google Docs, Google Blog, etc.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other</li> </ul>			
Post-reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of what was new or interesting in the text.</li> </ul>			Edmodo poll/quiz, Google Docs, Google Blog, Flip Grid, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debates on controversial topics</li> </ul>			Skype, Messenger, Viber, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparing the presented information to the students' own culture/traditions/norms/morals/etc.</li> </ul>			Wikis, Blogs, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summarizing the text (orally or in writing).</li> </ul>			Edmodo poll/quiz, Google Docs, Google Blog, etc.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other</li> </ul>			

(developed by the researcher)

## 6. Conclusion

Reading academic texts, whether in a traditional way or reading eBooks can be quite boring for students even in a quite relaxed environment. Integration of some technologically-assisted tasks aims to engage students into reading effectively and to share the obtained knowledge with the peers. There is no single recipe for the reading class. The choice of the tasks and the teaching/learning style may differ from one text / class to another. Thus, it should be modified according to the situation, students' needs, the nature of the text, etc. Blending the tasks will allow teachers to save time for face-to-face discussions by implementing some of the tasks outside the classroom.

Taking into consideration the speed of the development of educational technologies, especially the online and digital ones, it is only possible to predict the changes that expect the humanity in the nearest future. The claims of a possibility to replace a teacher, however, remain surrealistic, as interaction with technologies is not humane, which (besides the knowledge and skills) is essential in the process of learning.

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