The Changing Face of Language Learning: An Insight into Blended Language Learning Approach

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Abstract

The current paper discusses the advantages of harnessing web 2.0 tools to create blended English Language learning lessons for the learners irrespective of their ages and levels. The opportunities that are offered in the classrooms only, are quite restricted, consisting of a limited range of discourse and literacy practices using the traditional talk and chalk method. However, on the other hand the communication and the networking facilitated by the internet and its tools provide unlimited access to the meaningful and authentic language use. The author believes that though in the contemporary age,the importance of learning the language has increased manifold, the pedagogy has not been upgraded to meet the demands of the market which underscores the gap in the teaching-learning process. Hence, in order to plug the gap, the researcher suggests the urgent need to blend the traditional teaching methods of English language with that of the modern ones using a blended learning approach. It is believed that this win-win situation for both the teacher and the students,following an eclectic approach of blending, would give the comfort of teaching in a traditional classroom setting as well as bring enjoyment for the students to ride on the high tides of technology. The paper concludes with two ready to use technology enhanced classroom activities that can be blended easily with the other pen and paper language lessons.

Key Words: Blended Learning, Technology-enhanced language learning, English Language Teaching

Introduction

The use of technology and the tools facilitated by it have become so ubiquitous in the contemporary era that spending few hours without a mobile phone, for example, leaves a person with a feeling of emptiness, especially the young students, who are much more techno savvy and are usually referred to as the "Digital Natives". Hence, it seems their lives are dictated by the technology and ruled by the constant flux brought by it has made their process of learning, in a traditional set up, a very dull and boring experience. Against this backdrop, the researcher thought of adopting blended learning approach to teach English language skills to her students and to prepare them for their prospective professional skills. Blended learning is an approach to learning in which different learning methods are combined. It is the combination of multiple approaches to pedagogy or teaching. Further, the term has evolved as "a thoughtful integration of classroom face-to- face learning experiences with online learning experiences"(Garrison and Kanuka 97). It includes traditional face-to-face (F2F) classroom interaction and different forms of technology-based learning.

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The turn of the century has witnessed a profound impact of technology on education and English Language Teaching (ELT) is not an exception. With the advent of the Internet and its new means of communication facilitating collaboration between groups and individuals all over the world, the time has come to introduce this newness into the language learning courses also.

The Concept of Blended Learning

The term "blended learning" first appeared in around 2000.It is a flexible term, used to describe any and all varieties of teaching where there is integration of both face-to-face and online delivery methods. The practice of blending learning is, therefore, not a new way of teaching, nor is it a single method of learning. So, new are the opportunities offered by the Internet and Web 2.0 tools and the range of components that can be encompassed in the blend surely may give novelty to the teaching of English language. Also, the students are the new millennium learners, who are born and brought up with technology. Within the literature, a variety of attempts to define the term have been made. These include, but are not limited to:

- "a learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome and cost of program delivery" (Singh and Reed, 2001, p. 1)

- blended learning can be viewed as:

· a combination of modes of web-based technology

· a combination of various pedagogical approaches (e.g.,constructivism, behaviourism, cognitivism)

· a combination of any form of instructional technology with face-to-faceinstructor-led training

· a combination of instructional technology with actual job tasks inorder to create a harmonious effect of learning and working (Driscoll,2002)

- "Blended learning is the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences. The basic principle is that face-to-face oral communication andonline written communication are optimally integrated such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with thecontext and intended educational purpose." (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008, p.5)

Advantages of Blended approach for Language Learning and Teaching

Variety of Learning Styles: Teachers can also develop activities both online and in the classroom that would suit other learning styles such as social (interpersonal) by asking learners to cooperate in a task, or solitary (intrapersonal) by devising activities that learners can do through self-study. Moreover, a blended approach is particularly appropriate for language learning as learners can choose visual/ aural texts in preference to written texts, but they can also have both: they can watch a video/listen to audio whilst at the same time reading a transcript, thus using different senses to maximum effect.

Individual attention: Any teacher is familiar with having to face at least three levels in any classroom at any given time. The top 10% made up of faster learners; the bottom 10% made up of slower learners; with the 80% bulk representing the majority of the classroom population. Faced with

these differing levels, pressed by time and the syllabus and the looming of examinations, it is only human that many of us tend to forget about the top and bottom 10%. Subconsciously we feel that the top 10% do not need our help anyway and unfortunately there is not much time for the bottom 10%. So we tend to teach the bulk, thinking that at least we can help the majority of our learners. Blended learning helps teachers give all learners the attention they deserve by developing a course that will take learners' needs more closely into account. The high flyers are encouraged to expand their knowledge and go beyond what is required in the examination by (for example) searching for answers to their own questions online or preparing next week's topic in advance of the class. And finally, the use of a Learning Management System3 in a blended approach gives teachers a quick graphic overview of individual learners' progress, thus granting the possibility and opportunity of giving feedback to learners (to help improve their performance), as well as the ability to update and tweak course material to respond to learners' needs whenever appropriate (Kaplanis, 2013).

Increased social interaction in the classroom: The classroom environment offers the social space where communication as a social activity can be best served. Blended learning maximises social interaction (communication) in the classroom by freeing up time for both the teacher and the learner. The teacher has more time to create engaging learning experiences for their learners, secure in the knowledge that learners have had time to 'rehearse' online. The teacher often takes a back seat and lets them take centre stage, lets them 'act' in the classroom or engages in real-time communication with their peers, i.e. use their language productively. In the face-to-face environment, the learner is also able to ask questions of clarification on points of language (grammar, register, usage etc.) or at times may even take on the role of the teacher themselves by answering questions raised by their peers. The teacher also has more time to listen intently to the learners, which allows them at times to deviate from their carefully prepared plan and respond appropriately to learners' needs at a specific moment in time (Walsh, 2016).

Preparing confident learners: Fear of speaking in the class is considered as a significant obstacle in learning a second language as a learner as feels concerned on making mistakes and looking foolish in front of one's peers. A blended approach allows learners to prepare and practise on their own or with their peers online before a class, 'at their own pace and in their own time and as a result come to class much better prepared for speaking activities' (Marsh, 2012:16). A blended approach can also be used by learners to revise and consolidate what they have learnt in the classroom or simply to practise more.

Access to rich interactive input: Blended learning offers rich interactive multimedia input that is accessed through authentic video, audio, texts and visuals/graphics providing meaningful content relevant to learners' needs and interests, either pre-selected by the teacher (for lower level learners) or discovered by learners when surfing the internet (higher levels). This rich input is one of the major elements which help teachers devise a course that can respond to different learning styles, as mentioned above.

Technology leverage: Today's students are technology-savvy. And today many students are equipped with a desktop or laptop (even both, sometimes) and a mobile phone. This gives us a ready opportunity to leverage for learning the technology they already have at hand for everyday personal use, and without spending surplus budget on setting up the basic infrastructure (Thanekar, 2013). Not

only does it make learning an easy and interesting process, but it makes it an everyday occurrence and not something that only happens within the confines of a classroom environment, because, as we well know, learning does happen all the time, anywhere and anytime.

Web 2.0 Tools and Collaborative Learning

Owing to the high speed internet access and the tools facilitated by it, the sharing and collaboration of the resourceshas surged like never before. Emerging technologies in the 21st century such as web 2.0, mobile learning and interactive surfaces have brought about new opportunities and affordances for learning (Bishop &Elen, 2014).

There are many Web 2.0 tools which are free, easy to use, and do not need hardware with high specifications to be installed on the device to run. Research on web 2.0 tools seems mainly to focus on use of blogs and wikis, perhaps because these were the earlier emerging technologies (Hsu, Ching, and Grabowski, 2014). At present, many other web 2.0 tools have been used for instruction such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtubeand Padlet for video sharing, and other collaborative document sharing tools. Hsu, Ching, and Grabowski (2014) analysed the research on web 2.0 tools and inferred that the practice of using Web 2.0 tool are for the following: publishing and sharing information on learning to show progress and achievement; collaborating on learning tasks; enabling thinking processes and products to be evidenced; communicating and disseminating information; social networking in authentic environments; and building authentic and meaningful communities of practice. Besides these advantages, they also provide autonomy to the learner.

Blogs can be used for publishing and sharing information, for enabling thinking processes and for building communities of practice, while wikis can be used mainly for collaborating on learning tasks and enabling thinking processes to be evidenced (Hsu, Ching, and Grabowski, 2014). Although web 2.0 tools had rich affordances and could be used innovatively in learning and instruction, not all tools maximised the full potential of collaborative learning. This was because some of these tools were eventually used only for displaying information online, and not for collaboration or interaction. Hsu, Ching, and Grabowski (2014) suggests that the activities designed for web 2.0 should begin with having a shared goal which is common to the group and meaningful for construction of knowledge to the community.

There are many other new web 2.0 tools such as Google+, Dot Sub, Vialogue, Padlet, Edmodo, Prezi and Socratic. Research on these tools is needed to investigate the capabilities of using these tools for collaborative learning and instruction in higher education (Hsu, Ching, and Grabowski, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Recently, the learning theory of constructivism has been proposed as a basis for the instructional design of technology (Lebow 13) and Brooks and Brooks claim it to be a viable theory for language instruction (qtd. in Stepp-Greany 168). This theory posits that students are not passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, they are active participants in the construction of new knowledge that is idiosyncratic and derived from the learner's prior experience. In this theory also, students assume responsibility for their learning, and the teacher is a facilitator rather than a purveyor of knowledge, fulfilling a role similar to that described by Kern (106).

It is emphasized, in researcher's view, that there is a close parallel between the theory of constructivism and the pedagogy of web-based learning which could be summarized as follows (Perez Basanta 112):

Table 1 Constructivism and Web 2.0 Tools

Constructivism	Learning based on Web 2.0 tools
Construction of learning through meaningful activities.	Authentic and multi-media materials
Emphasis on big concepts, not hierarchical knowledge	Hypertextuality
Collaborative learning	Communication tools through digital platforms
Coaching and scaffolding	Human mediation and interaction
Learner's responsibility	Distance learning and learner autonomy

Ignacio Estrada said, "If a child cannot learn the way we teach, then we should teach the way they learn."

That is what educators have been trying to do through the use of Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL). Molly Lee, Coordinator, Asia-Pacific Programme of Educational Innovation for Development (APEID), UNESCO, Bangkok once said that UNESCO believes integrating ICT into education can help to bring quality education to everyone, everywhere – a key goal of the Education for All initiative. The citizens of the future must be equipped with sufficient knowledge to keep up with technological advances and demands of the Twenty first Century.

In this regard, with a limited body of research on the use of technology-enhanced language activities in the classroom in India, the researcher embraced the opportunity to introduce some technology oriented activities for her students to be performed in the language laboratory. In the present paper the researcher is going to share some such activities which can be infused in their college curriculum.

Sharma and Barret (2007) present four key principles to be followed for adopting a blended learning approach in the classroom. These are as follows:

1. Separate the role of the teacher and the role of technology.

2. Teach in a principled way.

3. Use technology to complement and enhance F2F teaching.

4. It's not so much the program, more what you do with it.

Marsh (2012) recommends four steps for the language teachers which they can use to design their own blended pathway.

"1. Identify the learning outcomes for your classroom lesson.

2. Identify the activities for student to do in class.

3. Identify the activities for students to do online before class.

4. Identify the activities for student to do after class."

Keeping the above given principles and recommendations in mind, the researcher designed some blended activities for her class. Two of them are as follows:

Sample Activity: Using Padlet for collaborative mini projects

Padlet is a virtual wall on which the word and pdf documents, images and multimedia files like videos, audios about a topic can be uploaded which can further be saved, copied and pasted into any other application and placed dynamically by using several techniques. It can be used for simple tasks for beginners or for expert instruction, and does not require special training (Weller, 2013). It can be used perfectly for a collaborative task as one can invite others to contribute - signup not required, work with unlimited contributors, Give read-only, writing, moderator, or admin access which can be revoked at any time. A significant obstacle to learning a second language is the fear of speaking in class based on concerns of making mistakes and looking foolish in front of one's peers. A blended approach allows learners to prepare and practise on their own or with their peers online before a class, 'at their own pace and in their own time and as a result come to class much better prepared for speaking activities' (Marsh, 2012:16). A blended approach can also be used by learners to revise and consolidate what they have learnt in the classroom or simply to practise more.

Aim: To imbibe information on a topic posted by the teacher to prepare a group project on it.

Focus: LSRW skills, Higher level thinking skills, Vocabulary Revision, Interaction

Level: Pre-Intermediate and above

Time: 120 minutes

Sites: https://padlet.com/

Teacher Preparation

- Create a classroom wall.

- Invite the participants.

- Present a topic for the project by uploading images, documents and multimedia files for the same and post their challenging task too.

- Show students how to use the website for the discussion and preparation of the project.

- Give autonomy to the students to use the intuitive website themselves.

- Instruct the students to give oral feedback to any two of their classmates' posts.

Sample Activity: Student's Blog

Students maintain a record of their practical work or assignments (like book reviews, mock-dialogue, presentations, mock-interview etc.) in the practical files. The researcher suggests recording such

works on a blog created and owned by the student rather than on a traditional practical file. The students are supposed to read the blog of any of their two classmates and post their comments.Using the blended approach, the teacher gets the opportunity to respond more easily to the learners' different styles by maximising the strengths of each environment such as:

• visual or aural (i.e. preferring to use pictures, images and sounds) through, for example, watching videos/listening to audio

• verbal (i.e. preferring to use language) through, for example, reading a text or asking learners to prepare a spoken or written text

• logical by, for example, using an inductive approach to grammar.

Aim: To post practical class record on blog

Language Skills: Writing, Critical Reading Skills, Analytical Skills

Level: Pre-Intermediate and above

Time: 120 minutes

Web-Sites:http://www.blogspot.com/, http://www.wordpress.com/

Teacher Preparation

· Explain students the advantages of using blogs over practical files.

· Demonstrate how to create a blog and publish posts on it.

· Familiarize them with all the features of a blog.

· Instruct students to update their blogs weekly.

Steps for Students

· Create a blog and personalize it using the template and the features of your choice.

· Give it a suitable title.

. Provide feedback on the posts of any two of your classmates.

It is suggested that technology along with the traditional methods holds the potential to address a variety of students' learning styles and academic needs simultaneously and seamlessly.

Conclusion

In order to produce innovative and knowledgeable students who have higher level thinking skills, web 2.0 tools may be introduced in the higher education setting, the present paper dealt with a goal of giving an introduction into various elements of blended learning that can be used by language teachers, both in and outside the classroom, to facilitate independent, engaging and motivational learning. An integration of traditional face-to-face class activities with online teaching and learning practices in a pedagogically planned manner can be the best definition of Blended learning. The

paper also offered a selection of ready-made and adaptable activities for a language classroom where the priority is to use class time for communicative practice. Using the given activities, teachers can make their students spend about 40% of time online and have 60% contact time per week in the classroom. Students work on a specific lesson before coming to the face-to-face classroom session. They prepare their face-to-face classes to include activities that consolidate what students have practised with online, providing students with the opportunity of using what they have learned in a meaningful, communicative way. This type of blended learning approach works well for the students at all levels. By preparing online and practising in class what they have learnt online, thus maximising their practice opportunities, students can become more autonomous and in charge of their own learning. Most of the face-to-face time can be devoted to practising language in a meaningful, dynamic, student-centred and communicative way. Research into blended learning of the learner and the learning experience and the teacher and the teaching experience undertaken by Marsh (2012) concluded that blended learning increases student efficacy for learning and allows for maximum effective use of classroom time.

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