

Learning to Learn with Blended Learning

Natalia Andrejeva (PhD)

Irina Ostroverkhaia (PhD)

Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Russia

Abstract

This study investigates Blended Learning implementation into the challenging educational environment, characterized by limited time of face-to-face interaction of the teacher and the learners, and by an extrinsic motivation of the learners. The feedback elicited from the focus group of learners and the teacher has been analyzed using methods of systematization, calculation and description. The findings reveal that the positive features of Blended Learning appear to be relative ease of use; availability and accessibility of learning and teaching materials; achievement of certain learning and teaching goals; enhancement of learning strategies and learners' self-organization; increase of learners' autonomy and independence; inspirational nature of the learning content; growth of learners' motivation; improvement of learners' language competence. In summary, the most meaningful outcome of Blended Learning implementation proves to be the fact that the Blended Learning technology helps learners to learn how to learn: how to remember, review and recycle foreign words and collocations; how to plan the pieces of writing; how to use instructional, model and reference materials independently; how to search for information and find it; how to gain knowledge on their own; how to organize their own learning process; how to become responsible for their own education and development.

Keywords: Blended learning, extrinsic motivation, learners' autonomy, learning strategies

Introduction

Nowadays, Blended Learning is being successfully implemented into learning and teaching contexts worldwide. As an educational technology, Blended Learning is described as “a combination of face-to-face delivery with eLearning activities” (Arshavskiy, 2013, p. 6); “face-to-face teaching and learning supplemented by an online component delivered through a learning management system” (Grgurović, 2014, p. 156); “a combination of

face-to-face and computer assisted learning in a single teaching and learning environment” (Neumeier, 2005, p. 164); “a combination of standard face-to-face teaching with e-learning” (Hubackova et al., 2011, p. 281). It seems indisputable that the Blended Learning technology has revolutionized both teaching and learning processes in recent decades. Such features of the Blended Learning technology as “round-the-clock and round-the-world availability and accessibility of training materials, ease of usage, enhancement of learning strategies and self-organization, increase of learners’ autonomy, eco-friendliness” (Andreeva and Ostroverkhaia, 2016 p. 65) are almost unanimously recognized as beneficial by the pedagogical community (Neumeier, 2005; Hubackova et al., 2011).

The experiment on Blended Learning implementation was carried out at Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University (Kaliningrad, Russia) during the academic year of 2015 – 2016. The overall goal of the experiment is to find out whether Blended Learning can be a fruitful educational tool in a challenging environment characterized by limited time of face-to-face interaction of the teacher and the learners, and by an extrinsic motivation of the learners.

This study demonstrates the findings based on the performance of the focus group comprised of 22 non-linguistic students whose specialization is Chemistry; whose level of English skills is low intermediate (A2 according to the CEFR); whose motivation for language learning is absolutely extrinsic because the learners “are inspired by external drivers and are aimed at getting certificates and good grades rather than acquiring skills” (Arshavskiy, 2013, p. 32). The learners were taught by Dr. Irina Ostroverkhaia, an experienced teacher-practitioner, PhD in Linguistics, a C1 certificate holder, a TKT (Teaching Knowledge Test) exam certificate holder.

The Blended Learning “Touchstone 3 (2nd Edition)” course by Michael McCarthy, Jeanne McCarten, Helen Sandiford, published by Cambridge University Press, was used as the basic instructional material. The Cambridge learning management system (LMS) served as a platform for online activities. According to the university curriculum, the focus group had only one face-to-face English class equal to 80 minutes per week. The experiment started on 15 October 2015 and finished on 15 May 2016. From 15 December 2015 to 15 February 2016, there was an interval in studies because of the learners’ academic session and winter holidays. All in all, there were only 25 face-to-face lessons, during which six units of the “Touchstone 3” course were covered. At the end of the academic term, the learners passed the final exam. Upon completion of the experiment, questionnaires were given to the learners and the teacher. The questions included into the questionnaires made it possible to reveal beneficial and vulnerable issues of Blended Learning implementation into a single

educational environment. The feedback elicited from the learners and the teacher has been analyzed using methods of systematization, calculation and description. The results are presented in this study.

Advantages of Blended Learning for the learners

Ease of use

All the learners, taking part in the Blended Learning experiment, have not got any previous experience of learning online or taking any online course. In spite of the absence of such an experience, all the learners have managed to learn how to use the interface of the www.cambridgelms.org site within a fortnight without any special training course. Only one hour of instruction on the LMS platform navigation was given to them. The respondents wrote, “Navigation on the LMS is not a problem for me” (Respondent Vitaly); “It was quite easy to learn how to use the LMS site” (Respondent Anastasia”).

Promotion of the learner’s autonomy and independence

In the Blended Learning environment, learners have an opportunity to learn at their own pace because the online Workbook is easily accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, from any point having access to the Internet. Each learner is fully supplied with all support materials including downloadable audio files, PDF files containing Language Summary for every lesson of the unit, keys for all exercises, and model answers for writing tasks. Besides, the learners have an unlimited permanent access to the Self Study section which is not controlled by the teacher so that any section of any unit of the course is available to any learner any time irrespective of the class timetable. The respondents wrote, “Thanks to the LMS, I can manage my time and do the tasks when it is convenient for me” (Respondent Evgenia); “The positive side of the experiment is numerous downloadable files. For example, I can download the audio file onto my PC and listen to it whenever I want to” (Respondent Mikhail); “If a person really wants to master the English language, this experiment is efficient for the independent development” (Respondent Tatiana).

Increase of the learner’s learning time

The Blended Learning technology increases the time spent by learners on language learning regardless of their motivation. The amount of learning time spent on doing homework is shown in the Gradebook of the online Workbook. The mean time spent by one learner on the online workbook is equal to approximately 37 hours per control period. The respondents wrote, “Last year, I used to spend only half an hour a week on doing my English homework. And now, I devote much more time to it

because I must do many compulsory exercises online” (Respondent Alina); “It’s unbelievable, but this year, I spend a lot of my free time on the computer doing my English tasks for the next lesson” (Respondent Eva); “This year, it takes me twice as much time to do my English than it took me before” (Respondent Veronika).

Priority improvement of the writing skill

In the conditions of the limited weekly face-to-face interaction, the Blended Learning experiment turned out to be the most powerful tool for enhancing such a productive skill as writing, which testifies the certain level of the learner’s confidence in foreign language acquisition. The skill of writing is intensively practiced through writing tasks accompanying almost every lesson of the unit, additional tasks on blog writing, and tasks on article preparation. The total amount of writing tasks per focus period is equal to 27 separate pieces. The feedback, elicited from 18 (82%) out of 22 respondents, highlights that the skill of writing appears to be the most widely trained skill of all. The respondents wrote, “Frankly speaking, I have never done so many writing tasks before this experiment. Now, I have to print exercises, blogs and articles for my every lesson!” (Respondent Yana); “I think that writing tasks are a very good practice because they supplement the textbook and help to consolidate the knowledge gained in the classroom” (Respondent Vlada).

Effective training of the listening skill

According to the feedback received from 16 (73%) respondents, the listening skill appears to be the second best trained skill in the Blended Learning experiment, because listening exercises are done by the learners not only during the face-to-face classes but also in the online Workbook as a part of their homework. Moreover, 4 (18%) respondents consider the listening skill to be the most intensively trained one. The respondents wrote, “As for me, listening tasks are the most interesting and useful” (Respondent Alina); “The experiment helps me to train the aspect of listening because there are numerous listening tasks” (Respondent Ekaterina); “Thanks to the experiment, I improved my listening skills. I’m glad that there are many interesting listening tasks in the course” (Respondent Evgenia).

Enhancement of the active vocabulary knowledge

About 600 words have been learnt and recycled by the learners for the control period. The obvious positive point of the Corpus based “Touchstone 3” course is that it is aimed at teaching, learning and practising frequent, natural, real-life and useful words, expressions and collocations. All the respondents unanimously admit that their active vocabulary has increased considerably during the Blended Learning experiment. The

respondents wrote, “In this year, I have learnt a large number of useful English words” (Respondent Mikhail); “The experiment gives us many words which we need for communication” (Respondent Eva); “My level of English has become higher because I have learnt many new words and constructions” (Respondent Rafiali).

High motivating potential

The Blended Learning “Touchstone 3” course proved to be an effective motivating tool thanks to the interesting content of topics which allow learners to practise natural language in authentic context. Such multicultural topics as “Experiences”, “Wonders of the World”, and “Food Choices” stimulate learners for language learning. All the 22 (100%) respondents feel positive about the content of the course and regard it to be inspirational. The respondents wrote, “In my opinion, the units of the course are very interesting because they address our personal experience. When I write or speak about my own trips and adventures, I feel confident about my English language skills” (Respondent Viktoria); “My motivation for learning English has increased since I started this course. It is because the themes are contemporary and enjoyable” (Respondent Ostap).

Effective training of learning strategies

One of the most meaningful results of the current Blended Learning experiment is that it has helped the learners to train learning strategies. They have learnt how to make topical vocabulary lists, how to use reference material given in the Language Summary, how to remember, review and recycle words and collocations, how to plan the pieces of writing, how to search the Internet for specific information, how to use language models and patterns, etc. Owing to the experiment, the learners have become more responsible for the process of their own learning. The feedback received from 15 (68%) respondents states that the Blended Learning “Touchstone 3” course makes it possible for them to learn without the teacher’s help and to improve their ways of learning. The respondents wrote, “Before the experiment, the teacher was the only source of information for me, but now I can gain knowledge myself” (Respondent Vlada); “I’ve learnt how to learn successfully. Firstly, I make a list of all tasks which I have to do for the next lesson. Secondly, I go through the theoretical material given in the Language Summary. Thirdly, I work with the active vocabulary of the Unit. Fourthly, I do the tasks. Fifthly, I use the keys and clear the wrong points. Sixthly, I redo all the exercises in the online Workbook” (Respondent Ekaterina); “I have made the alphabetical lists of new words for every Lesson of the Unit. These lists are very helpful” (Respondent Arina); “I’ve printed

communication questions on separate cards, and I use these cards for speaking to my classmate” (Respondent Anastasia).

Improvement of the learner’s self-organization

In their feedback, 19 (86%) learners noted that the Blended Learning experiment teaches them to meet deadlines for completion and to manage their time more rationally. The respondents wrote, “To tell the truth, I’m completely disorganized by nature, but the experiment helped me to become more organized, because I had to do the tasks in the online Workbook during the limited period of time after which the tasks became closed” (Respondent Arina); “My self-organization increased because I had to meet deadlines and prepare all tasks in time” (Respondent Alina).

Improvement of the learner’s computer skills

The Blended Learning technology implies a certain degree of the user’s computer literacy, without which any meaningful results cannot be obtained. In the course of the current Blended Learning experiment, the learners’ computer skills have improved. This positive effect was mentioned by 10 (45%) learners in their questionnaires. The respondents wrote, “The experiment helps to improve computer skills if you are not very good at them” (Respondent Narmontas); “I used to type very slowly in English. After the experiment, my typing skills improved” (Respondent Rafiali); “This experiment helps to master writing with the keyboard” (Respondent Anton).

Advantages of Blended Learning for the teacher

Efficiency of monitoring learners’ performance

The online Workbook is supplied with an option of constant and immediate reflection of learners’ performance and progress in the electronic Gradebook. The teacher wrote, “The online Workbook is absolutely teacher-friendly in terms of observing the learners’ performance: it is possible to see the status of each learner’s progress on a particular activity; the volume of the covered material is available per lesson, per unit and per course; the total time spent by the learner on doing tasks of the online Workbook is automatically shown.”

Powerful methodical support

The obvious positive point of the Blended Learning “Touchstone 3” course is its step-by-step provision with authentic control materials. The teacher wrote, “The teaching support kit is incredibly practicable: assessment quizzes are available for each unit; progress tests are intended for checking a number of units; all control materials can be both photocopied and downloaded onto the classroom computer stations.” More than that, the

“blended” layout of the Teacher’s Edition assists the teaching process considerably. The teacher wrote, “The five-in-one Teacher’s Edition is extremely well-developed as it combines real pages of the Student’s textbook, notes for the teacher for every lesson, keys for the Workbook tasks, the list of the most frequent words, and scripts for audio files.”

Effective achievement of teaching goals

The Blended Learning technology has allowed the teacher to achieve such teaching goals as educating the learners irrespective of their motivation and teaching the learners to organize their own educational process because each learner has to meet weekly short-term deadlines in order not to fall behind their classmates. The teacher wrote, “As an educator, I am completely satisfied with Blended Learning because even the least motivated learners are obliged to learn a certain portion of material in a set period of time and to fulfill particular tasks to meet fixed deadlines. The learners of this focus group have learnt to become responsible for their own learning process and to manage their time effectively.”

Disadvantages of Blended Learning for the learners

Ineffective training of the speaking skill

On condition that there is only one face-to-face (contact) class per week, such a productive skill as speaking appears to be the least trained skill during the current experiment. All 22 (100%) learners of the focus group consider the skill of speaking to be the most important skill for the person’s language competence, but the limited amount of face-to-face lessons prevents them from mastering this skill in full extent. The respondents wrote, “I find the aspect of speaking to be the most difficult one, but we have too little time to master this skill” (Respondent Mikhail); “During the lesson, our teacher does her best to answer our questions about correct constructions and the right order of words. It takes much time, so very little time is left for other activities especially for speaking” (Respondent Evgenia); “It’s a pity that we experience the dramatic lack of time for oral activities, group work, discussions, exchange of views and ideas” (Respondent Narmontas).

Disappointment because of technical problems with the LMS

Technical problems with the LMS operation have turned out to be the obvious demotivating factor of the Blended Learning educational environment because learners get annoyed and even frustrated when technical difficulties interfere with their studies. According to the questionnaires, 12 (55%) respondents are irritated at the slow navigation on the LMS; 9 (41%) respondents have had log-in problems more than three times because the LMS does not accept their logins and passwords from the

first attempt; 8 (36%) respondents underlined that the LMS did not save the results of their work and they had to redo the tasks in the online Workbook more than once; 5 (23%) respondents reported the unexpected closing of the online session; 2 (9%) respondents have had difficulties with submitting their writing tasks to the LMS; 1 (4.5%) respondent tried to log in while the LMS was being upgraded. The respondents wrote, “The negative moment of the experiment is that the LMS platform is often buggy. It’s really annoying if you have to redo the tasks online because your results are not saved” (Respondent Viktoria); “The disadvantage is that because of the failure of the site I had to type my answers once again. And it’s very irritating □” (Respondent Mikhail); “I become irritated because there are drawbacks in the elaboration of the site. It sometimes gets buggy, crashes and doesn’t save the results” (Respondent Veronika).

Inconvenience of getting the teacher’s online feedback on writing tasks.

The most inconvenient feature of the current Blended Learning experiment seems to be the option of getting the teacher’s feedback on learners’ writing tasks in the online mode. After the content of the lesson becomes locked according to the timetable, it is not possible for the learners to get access to their writing products and to the teacher’s comments in order to view their vulnerable points. Besides, it will be impossible for the learners to use their writing tasks for reviewing purposes after the expiry date of the class. All 22 (100%) learners are unanimous in considering the teacher’s online feedback to be the least productive characteristic of the Blended Learning experiment. All the learners prefer to get the teacher’s feedback in a traditional paper format. The respondents wrote, “When the teacher corrects my mistakes online, it’s not very useful because I can’t get access to my weak points constantly” (Respondent Anastasia); “I’d like to have the teacher’s comments in my paper notebook because the teacher’s online comments and corrections are not user-friendly for me. It’s very difficult to use these comments if you want to discuss your drawbacks in the classroom” (Respondent Yulia).

Disadvantages of Blended Learning for the teacher

Inconvenience and ineffectiveness of online grading learners’ writing tasks

Online grading learners’ writing tasks has appeared to be the most ineffective, time-consuming and tiresome part of the current Blended Learning experiment. The Teacher wrote, “It is difficult and sometimes even impossible to correct all the learners’ mistakes and typos in the online mode. Typing comments and correcting learners’ mistakes online takes a lot of time, but its educational value is minimal because learners have limited

online access to the teacher’s feedback. In order to cope with this difficulty and make the feedback permanently available and useful to the learners, I have to print out their writing tasks and correct them in a traditional way using a red pen. Then I make my learners compose a Portfolio of their writing tasks for the further use. Thus, Blended Learning becomes even “more blended”. Furthermore, the current level of the learners’ skills very often prevents them from correct interpreting my comments, so they need to make hard copies and ask me for clarification of the confused points at our face-to-face lessons.”

Relative stressfulness caused by the LMS operation

In the course of the current experiment, there have been several occasional troubles with the LMS navigation. Such troubles represent the stressful factor and interfere with the productivity of the teaching process. The Teacher wrote, “I have experienced several really upsetting and distressing situations connected with the teacher’s role on the LMS. Since the experiment started, the algorithm of tasks scheduling has changed on the LMS platform. It took me a considerable amount of time to learn how to place the forthcoming tasks onto the notice board of the What-to-Do-Next section though the learner’s interface did not change. More than that, when I wanted to use the option of opening or closing all the units at once, my laptop hung and I had to perform a cold reboot of the computer. It goes without saying that such incorrect operation is very annoying and even frustrating.”

Prospects for further investigation

The Blended Learning technology seems to provide a good basis for further research. Investigation of advantages and disadvantages of Blended Learning implementation into different educational contexts may lead to significant findings. Thus, it would be interesting to study the results of Blended Learning implementation into the following educational environments: (1) an educational environment characterized by sufficient contact hours of the teacher and learners (at least 3 lessons per week) and learners’ extrinsic motivation; (2) an educational environment characterized by limited number of contact hours of the teacher and learners (1 lesson per week) and learners’ intrinsic motivation; (3) an educational environment characterized by sufficient contact hours of the teacher and learners (at least 3 lessons per week) and learners’ intrinsic motivation.

Conclusion

The experiment on Blended Learning implementation into the challenging educational environment, characterized by limited time of face-

to-face interaction of the teacher and the learners, and by an extrinsic motivation of the learners, has revealed both advantageous and disadvantageous characteristics. The positive features for both the learners and the teacher are relative ease of use; availability and accessibility of learning and teaching materials; achievement of certain learning and teaching goals; enhancement of learning strategies and learners' self-organization; increase of learners' autonomy and independence; inspirational nature of the learning content; growth of learners' motivation; improvement of learners' language competence. The most problematic issues are relative inconvenience and ineffectiveness of the teacher's online feedback; the feeling of failure at the possible incorrect LMS operation; ineffective training of the speaking skill.

In summary, it should be noted that the advantages of Blended Learning implementation undoubtedly outweigh its disadvantages. The most meaningful outcome of its implementation proves to be the fact that Blended Learning helps learners to learn how to learn: how to remember, review and recycle foreign words and collocations; how to plan the pieces of writing; how to use instructional, model and reference materials independently; how to search for information and find it; how to gain knowledge on their own; how to organize their own learning process; how to become responsible for their own education and development. The effectiveness of Blended Learning implementation even into a challenging learning and teaching context can be best described in the teacher's feedback, "A well-known proverb, reflecting the essence of education in a non-blended environment, says, "You can take a horse to water but you can't make him drink". Things are completely different with Blended Learning. This technology revolutionizes the educational process. Thus, the classical reading of the proverb can be paraphrased. Now, it seems to read as follows, "With the help of Blended Learning, you can take a horse to water and you CAN make him drink". Even the least motivated learners are obliged to learn a certain portion of material in a set period of time and to fulfill particular tasks to meet fixed deadlines".

References:

- Andreeva N., Ostroverkhaia I. (2016). Social networking interaction in foreign language teaching to non-linguistic learners // Proceedings: 4th Eurasian Multidisciplinary Forum (4, 2016; Vienna) / 4th Eurasian Multidisciplinary Forum, EMF 2016, 27-29 April, Vienna, Austria. European Scientific Institute, ESI, 2016. P. 58 – 66.
- Arshavskiy M. (2013). Instructional Design for ELearning: Essential guide to creating successful eLearning courses. Leipzig: Amazon Distribution GmbH. 208 p.

Grgurović M. (2014). An application of the Diffusion of Innovations theory to the investigation of blended language learning // *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 8:2, pp. 155 – 170, DOI:10.1080/17501229.2013.789031

Hubackova S., Semradova I., Frydrychova Klimova B. (2011). Blended learning in a foreign language teaching // *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 28 (2011), pp. 281 – 285.

Neumeier P. (2005). A closer look at blended learning – parameters for designing a blended learning environment for language teaching and learning. *ReCALL*, Volume 17, Issue 2; November 2005, pp. 163 – 178. DOI:10.1017/S0958344005000224