



The Asset to Effective Teaching Is Ecological Blended Learning (EBL)

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Received; 02 Feb. 2017 Accepted; 18 Feb. 2017; © The author(s) 2017. Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

ABSTRACT: *Teaching practices have recently witnessed certain improvements. Today's trend is to switch from traditional to modern methodologies that could enhance English Language Teaching Pedagogy (ELTP). This switch is meant to positively affect learning practices and lead to better academic achievements. To this effect, the article at hand finds it crucial, especially, for Non-Native English Speakers (NNESs) to go for a mixed mode of education that merges both face-to-face (F-t-F) instruction and e-learning (EL). Two parts are encompassed in this regard: F-t-F instruction and EL. Although both perspectives have their own pros and cons, they can converge in ELT to proffer a more cogent picture about the latest innovative practices in this field. From this angle, the current paper seeks to introduce blended learning (BL) as an incentive for hybrid teaching and a way whereby to flip the English language classroom (ELC). It equally targets to model BL and anchor it in the 21st century ELTP while unveiling its main strengths and limitations. Last but not least, the present work aims to proffer BL with an ecological perspective that focuses on improving ELC's physical and emotional settings. This is per se a drive to innovate teaching and make the classroom more conducive to learning.*

Keywords: *Traditional, Blended Learning, Technology, Pedagogy, Approaches*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Blended learning is a terrific example of combining the strengths of multiple methods into powerful educational experiences that benefit our students.” [1]

To obtain modern learning standards, neither traditional teaching approaches nor technological methods alone can provide students with effective and relevant learning skills. But the combination of both approaches can help in enhancing education in a constructive way which is known as ‘Blended Learning’. It is a fundamental change brought in the educational program with different approaches to enrich the learners. Blended Learning is a combination of online learning and traditional face-to-face instruction. It is also termed as ‘Hybrid learning’ ‘Mixed learning’ and ‘Integrative learning’. It's defined as

“Combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the self-directed and active learning opportunities that the online environment offers.” [2]

Blended learning is a student-centered approach where it provides the learners with more real world opportunities for interaction and socialization. Online learning in blended approach facilitates the teaching and makes it skillful but at the same time, it doesn't degrade the significance of the traditional value of face-to-face teachings. This approach is all about efficiently incorporating information and communication technologies into designing course and also in enhancing teaching and learning experiences for both students and teachers. It's mainly beneficial for the learners as online learning provides them with convenience and flexibility. Learners develop many skills like collaboration skills, management skills, and self-directed learning through this approach.

Flipped classroom is a form of Blended learning approach where the teachers flip their classes by delivering instructional content or the text often online, outside the classroom and in class they include activity learning, skill development, modern event discussions or research topics extensively. Learners are expected to watch lectures online at home and discuss the work in the class. This model allows the teachers to engage the learners in innovative ways both inside and outside the classrooms with a range of modern teaching tools and methods. Learners are actively involved in knowledge acquiring and evaluating their learning. The purpose of this flipped class is to make the learners inquire about the subject, test their intellect and socialize with one another in activities. During these sessions, instructors function as mentors, encouraging learners to master their skills in a collaborative atmosphere.

II. MODELING BLENDED LEARNING

Blended learning model increases the ability and individuality of the learners and also allows teachers to expand their time as facilitators of learning. Educators have developed six models under Blended learning which are effectively used in the institutions based on their unique student population. Learners benefit from these models using their own creativity, learning experience, and individual strengths.

2.1 Face-to-Face Driver Model

Face-to-Face Driver model works excellently for diversified classrooms where learners are performing at various levels of ability and mastery in skills. In this model, instructors deliver most of the course considering technology as a secondary approach. These instructors create online resources as a continuation or revision of the course material which the learners can review at home, in the classroom or in the technological lab.

This model helps the learners to master the language, who sometimes are incapable of understanding the concepts. Depending on their grade levels, learners can proceed at a more rapid pace in the activities or challenges to prevent themselves from boredom. Even a low-level student is given remedial classes online in this model to practice and master language and digital skills and techniques to improve their abilities at a rapid pace. Digital technology is used to supplement learning experience.

2.2 Rotation Model

In this form of blended learning, students rotate between various locations on a fixed schedule – either functioning online or face-to-face with the instructor. This model is widely used in the education program these days. Learners are encouraged to face more challenges and learn material that had not yet been introduced in the classroom. Students have a set schedule to where they move from the face-to-face traditional session to online session. In this model, learners are divided basing upon their skills and levels in the language. Thus, students who are stronger in one skill and weaker in the other may have face-to-face session with their instructors for that skill before moving on or rotating to the online learning for another skill. Instructors assist the weaker students individually to help them master language skills. This model is further classified as Station Rotation, Lab Rotation, Flipped Classroom and Individual Rotation for the benefit of the learners.

2.3 Flex Model

In this approach, even though the instructor is present for assistance, the course is primarily delivered online. Here learners learn independently and practice new theories, the process is self-guided. Instructors are just facilitators who provide help as needed. In this model, online learning is the strength of student learning. Students and teachers have control over how they use the time. Instructors give individual attention to the learners as when required. This model works for group projects, small group instructions, and individual tutoring, as it gives learners more autonomy in making decisions about their learning path. This model along with its benefits also has some drawbacks in regard to learners. Students tend to misuse their autonomy due to which they have a higher absence rate in a tutorial session. Some students even lack motivation and dedication in the skills or sessions.

2.4 Online Lab Model

Online Lab Model deals with entire course online in a brick and mortar lab environment. Instructors interact with the students through recorded videos, audio and video conferences or forums and email. This model is helpful for the learners in the rural areas. Teachers supervise the lab to mark their attendance but they are not trained course teachers. This model is helpful for learners who need the flexibility of scheduling due to other responsibilities of life. It has its own drawback as there is no certified course instructor to assist the learners.

2.5 Self - Blend Model

Self - Blend Model gives exciting opportunities to the students to learn beyond traditional classrooms. In order to be successful, learners need to be highly motivated to take additional courses of interest in the subject area. This self-blend is a supplement to their traditional learning experience. This model is beneficial for highly motivated and independent learners, as it adds to their credits in the institutions. It also tackles the problem of the courses which are not provided in the colleges due to various reasons. These courses are designed in a way to be affordable for the learners and help them develop professionally. This model enhances their classroom learning and also sharpens their digital skills.

“Self – blending refers to courses in which individual students or groups of students take the initiative to add or supplement learning experiences in a course with digital and / or face-to-face learning activities.” [3]

2.6 Online Driver Model

Online Driver Model is in contrary to the Face-to-Face driver model. It is a form of blended learning where learners operate from distant areas. The material is provided via an online program. Learners can clarify their doubts with the instructors online. This model is ideal for students who demand more flexibility and individualization in their schedules. Learners operate online and come to the institution if required. This education program benefits students with persistent illness or for students who demand more autonomy due to their job conditions. Even students who are highly motivated and want to progress faster can benefit from this type of model. Instructors serve only as facilitators of learning in this model.

As every coin has two sides in the same way this Blended Learning approach has its own advantages and disadvantages.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF F-T-F INSTRUCTION IN ELT

3.1. Better focus for more practice

It is generally acknowledged in literature that F-t-F instruction has its strengths in ELT. This particular type of instruction allows teachers and students to act and react through a give-and-take process. Choudhury (2005) confirms that “the best way to learn to interact is through interaction itself” [4]. This can ensure better focus from both parties. Students are more able to concentrate on what is being taught, so there is less risk of distraction and more potential for Teacher-Student (T-S) and Student-Student (S-S) interaction. F-t-F instruction can proffer learners with more opportunities to practice a bundle of receptive, productive, social, thinking, and critical thinking skills. To this effect, the teacher can use different simulation strategies to enhance T-S and S-S interactions. Students can in turn be exposed to miscellaneous techniques, get involved in the resolution of different tasks, and be more engaged in practicing the targeted skills. Owing to F-t-F instruction, students have more chances to practice English, as their Target Language (TL) collaboratively. Miliszewska (2007) underscores this importance of F-t-F tuition by considering it at the heart of the educational system and a catalyst for improving it.

3.2. Casting more heed to students’ needs

F-t-F instruction entails F-t-F communication that can be exchanged between the teacher and the student (T-S) or among the students themselves (S-S). Both teachers and students can ask questions that can be answered immediately; that is, on the spot, which can increase the response rate. This means the provision of direct feedback, which can, in turn, pave the way for the establishment of dialogues. The latter, mutually shared between T-S and S-S, can add value to the in-class exploration of key issues. F-t-F instruction can provide the teacher with the chance to test the syllabus and tailor the content of the course to the needs of his/her students in ELC. Being on the spot, the teacher can diagnose these needs and notice who is facing problems regarding the use of TL in the specific context of a situation. The teacher can check whether there is a mismatch between TL’s production and comprehension to intervene for remedy if any. She can even offer help after class sessions or during breaks. Thus, “teachers, through face-to-face interaction, can play an important role contextualizing and interpreting the content of study materials to make it useful for their students.” [5]

3.3. More interaction for better socialization

F-t-F instruction can allow teachers and students to dialogue, which “not only allows students to assess their learning but also to develop a sense of community with other students; this sense of community can alleviate the problem of isolation often reported by distance students.” [5] By dialoguing and conversing with one another, both teachers and students can express their views freely and fairly. They can use not only the verbal but also the non-verbal component to communicate what they intend to and clarify what they find ambiguous. What is said can be upheld via eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, tone and voice modulation etc. By doing so, both parties can establish social contact, build interpersonal relationship, and foster social interaction in ELC. They can reach “teacher-learner congruence.” [6] Such ‘zone of congruence’ (C-zone) is built on mutual trust, negotiation, coaching, scaffolding. It is a serious step to get both parties socialize into ELC.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF EL IN ELT

4.1. Introducing technology for better use of TL

With the latest boom in information technologies, a revolution has resulted in today’s education. Needless to say, “Distance education is an increasingly common educational alternative as well as a key contributor to the newly competitive landscape in higher education.” [5] Cyber boom has changed the educational system from traditional to modern. Introducing EL into ELC has become an urge for both teachers and students alike. Integrating technology into the classroom is meant to enrich the teaching and learning experience. Introducing students to language through the assistance of the computer can take part in enhancing their language and computer skills. This can for sure positively impact their English language use. The more

exposure students get to innovative technology, the more proficient they become in using TL. Besides, “advanced technologies, such as streaming media technologies, are very capable of supporting voice and video and afford the possibility to emulate face-to-face interaction.” [5] Beauchamp & Kennewell (2010) even confirms that “investigating how technology can be harnessed to facilitate orchestration by teachers and learners will guide teachers’ efforts to improve learning through the use of ICT.” [7]

The acronym “ICTs” (Information and Communication Technologies) tagged in plural is a common core. It encompasses various technologies that are used for facilitating communication such as Cellular Phones, radio, video, television, computers, and satellite systems among others. [8]

Inculcating ICTs into higher education has recently become a necessity, and especially a way whereby to tailor teaching with the needs of the contemporary society.

4.2. Integrating online courses for more consolidation of the traditional ones

Online courses, which can also be labeled E-courses, can represent an appropriate consolidation for what is being studied in ELC. The integration of web-based online learning can expose teachers and learners to a variety of resources, programs, and databases at lower costs, which can, in turn, enhance their skills. This will complement the teaching and learning landscape as the information provided by the teacher and the learner for a certain period of time can be consolidated further through the Internet, which can save them much time to direct focus to other syllabus-based concerns. What is delivered through an online platform and lectures can merge to help both the teacher and the learner allocate the classroom time for more practice of activities and tasks in accordance with the curriculum objectives? Such an “online delivery” [5] can blur spatial and temporal barriers to offering teachers and learners more interactivity, flexibility, and affordability of teaching and learning materials.

4.3. Self-regulation for more independent instruction

EL can be deemed a self-paced type of learning that can allow the learner to complement what is being studied in class following a specific rhythm that can suit them and at a flexible time schedule. They can regulate their own pace of learning and feel independent to add to the course delivered inside ELC what they see crucial. In this regard, they self-direct their learning, which makes them more autonomous. In the same vein, they can develop their thinking, critical thinking, hence research skills, which can foster independent instruction. The latter can be a drive for teachers to innovate their practices in ELC and update their methodologies accordingly. Needless to say, the more independent tuition is, the more teachers themselves can delve into action teaching by redefining their roles and embracing more coaching. This is achieved by empowering the learner and seeking how to facilitate the teaching and learning processes.

V. BL AND THE ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Merging F-t-F and online instruction will result in BL. The latter can bridge between both types of tuition and even provide it with more assets for more effectiveness. The position supported in the current study is that BL can be approached ecologically. That is, the more positive the learning environment is, the more effective teaching becomes. Instructional effectiveness can be fulfilled if both physical and emotional settings in ELC are made suitable for learning. Both settings are the main components of classroom ecology (CE). Sussman (2012) and Hannah (2013) argue that CE can provide an appropriate environment for the fulfillment of BL.

Being on the same wavelength with Sussman (2012) and Hannah (2013), Cordall (2014) maintains that effective teaching is the one that merges approach, method, and technique that are applied to a classroom setting that is in turn based on the amalgamation of both interaction and interactivity. In other words, classes should be physically well furnished: decorations, exploitation of the wall space, suitable arrangement of desks etc. This can pave the way for both teachers and learners, being the human resources of the classroom, to feel relaxed and motivated to share knowledge and experience.

An ecological perspective is by excellence a humanistic and social one. It takes into consideration not only the physical environment of ELC but also the emotional one. In other words, by feeling relaxed, teachers and students can form a social learning community. This implies redefining the role of the teacher who should be a facilitator who contributes to the creation of a new safe and hybrid ELT methodology. BL can localize, socialize, and personalize teaching, which goes on par with Brown’s (1998) **Principle of the Integrated Whole** according to which ELC is viewed not only a social but also an ecological context where the feelings of fear and frustration are substituted for by those of relaxation and motivation. Crouse (2013) emphasizes the vital role of the learning space as one “of the 21st century support systems” [9] and action steps “necessary to ensure student mastery of 21st century skills” [9].

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