

BOOK REVIEW

Blended Learning in English Language Teaching: Course Design and Implementation

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Blended Learning in English Language Teaching: Course Design and Implementation

Brian Tomlinson and Claire Whittaker, Eds.

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252 pp.

\$19.39 (£12.00) [Hard Copy]

ISBN: 978-0863-557-06-4

Blended learning has become a buzzword in many educational environments in recent years, usually referring to courses that employ a mix of face-to-face and online learning (Bonk & Graham, 2012). The term originated in workplace learning literature, but is also now widely used in higher education, often describing courses that have had an online component added to them (MacDonald, 2006). Some attention has been paid to the applications of blended learning in language teaching as a whole (Neumeier, 2005; Sharma & Barrett, 2007), but very little work has been done specifically in English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts. Indeed, with reference to ELT, Neumeier (2005) highlights a need for further research to be conducted into what makes an effective blend.

In response to the deficit of literature described above, *Blended Learning in English Language Teaching: Course Design and Implementation* is a collection of 20 case studies, illustrating applications of blended learning in various ELT contexts. The collection starts with a foreword from John Knagg (OBE), who justifies the volume as a response to the “relatively little discussion and writing about the principles that should be applied in blending elements which use technology with more traditional face-to-face teaching in the same course” (p. 3). He also mentions that, although the collection is situated in the area of ELT, many of the principles discussed will likely be applicable to other areas of education too. Indeed, he indicates that the intended audience for the book includes teachers and trainee teachers in the field of Education, as well as those in the areas of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics.

The foreword is followed by a preface and introduction by one of the book’s editors, Claire Whittaker. In the preface, she addresses her own personal motivation for originally proposing this publication, and then in the introduction

provides an overview of blended learning. When considering how to define blended learning, she points out that, despite some disagreements in the literature, the term is usually taken to mean a combination of face-to-face and online activities within a course of study. An examination of reasons given in the literature for adopting a blended learning approach is then presented, as well as a consideration of different types of blend, in both general and ELT contexts. Finally, she discusses the effectiveness of blended learning approaches and the importance of “getting the blend right” (p. 19). In this final part of the introduction, she cites calls in the literature for further research, particularly emphasizing Westbrook’s (2008, p. 14) claim that there is a “huge deficit in terms of research on using blended learning by individuals or small language schools”. Overall, the introduction gives readers a useful overview of blended learning through which to frame the case studies that follow.

In this volume, the case studies presented are divided into four categories: English for Academic Purposes (EAP); Teacher development; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); and English as a Foreign Language (EFL)/General English (GE). Each category has its own section, complete with section-specific comments on key points from Brian Tomlinson. As each case study in the book describes a different context and approach, all chapters are dealt with in the following paragraphs.

Within the EAP section, four different case studies are presented. This, together with EFL/GE, is the shortest section of the volume, possibly in response to Westbrook’s (2008) assertion that most of the research previously published on blended learning has been based in the tertiary sector. Jody Gilbert presents the first case study, which describes a collaborative online reading and research project in the context of a Canadian university pre-enrolment programme. As with many of the studies in the book, this is an example of a course where an online element was added to what had been a predominantly face-to-face offering. She emphasizes the flexibility that the blended learning approach afforded, as well as how it allowed

her to meet students’ needs more effectively, particularly in the area of online research. The success of the course is supported by student comments indicating a positive response to the blended aspect, although it is not clear how these comments were collected.

Peter Aborisade outlines a case study in a Nigerian university context in the next chapter. This paper illustrates how a blended approach can be adopted in low-resource environments with large numbers of students, although the author does note that there are only seven higher education institutions in Nigeria registered in the Moodle directory, suggesting that his university is one of the more technologically advanced institutions in his country. Feedback from an end of course evaluation questionnaire indicates a generally positive response from students, and the author highlights two major benefits of the approach as being increased study hours for students and the promotion of independent learning.

The third EAP case study, reported by Natalya Eydelman, describes a blended academic writing course at a Russian university. She integrated the use of a wiki into her course with main aims of motivating students to write and providing a space for them to communicate online. Overall, she reports that students responded positively, but she does not state how she collected feedback. It is also noticeable that she mentions maintaining students’ motivation throughout the course as being a challenge, so it seems that the blended approach may not have been as successful at motivating students as had been intended.

In the final EAP chapter, Juanita Pardo-Gonzalez describes the inclusion of blended learning in an undergraduate English course at a Colombian university that already had “a very strong internet culture” (p. 51). The decision to adopt a blended approach in this situation appears to have mainly been a top-down one, but the author also mentions a number of other reasons for change; in particular, improving students’ access to learning and offering them greater flexibility. This paper does not explicitly provide details of how students evaluated the

course, but does describe the iterative nature of how the course has been improved over a period of nine years. The gradual process of development over time may be of particular interest to educators who have already begun experimenting with blended learning approaches.

The teacher development section of the book contains six case studies, the first of which describes a blended learning approach to a course on blended learning instruction for ELT practitioners. In this chapter, Nik Peachey describes the logical decision for instructors to practice what they were preaching by blending the content of their course. Particular attention is given to the length and ordering of the online and face-to-face components of the course, and it is notable that this case study is one of only a small number where the online element is the lead mode. The author provides his own evaluation of the course; however, it is unclear if any feedback was collected from students.

Gavin Dudeney and Nicky Hockly present a similar type of technology-based teaching course in the next chapter, with a description of how an entirely online “Cert ICT: Certificate in Teaching Languages with Technology” programme was converted into a blended offering. This chapter is the only one in the book that details the addition of a face-to-face component to an existing online course, and the rationale for making this change is explained carefully. It appears that the authors wished to utilise “the inherent advantages of both face-to-face and online instruction” (p. 75); however, they also note that “generally, our course participants have received little or no technology training in the past” (p. 76), which certainly appears to justify the provision of some form of face-to-face support component. Student comments suggest a positive response to the course, but, as in some other chapters, it is not clear how these comments were gathered. In their summary, the authors note that, despite positive feedback on the blended approach, enrolments for the fully online version of the course remain significantly higher, suggesting that many prospective students do not see the benefit of a blended approach over a purely online one.

In the next chapter, Keith O’Hare and Xu Bo describe a blended approach to instruction on language test writing for Chinese secondary school teachers. As a justification for their approach, they highlight the perceived need for face-to-face contact in the Chinese context, but also the need for flexibility through online learning, given the geographical range of participants and their unpredictable work schedules. Comments from partners and participants are provided to illustrate the positive reception of the course; however, it is not clear whether these were part of some kind of systematic evaluation.

Next, Ron White, Andy Hockley, Stephen Heap and George Pickering present a blended approach to an international language teaching management diploma course in their case study. As with some other studies in this volume, they emphasize the iterative development of their course over time, and describe carefully the sequencing of face-to-face and online components. When considering the success of the course, the authors refer to their own reflections and retention rate data. However, this chapter would have benefitted from the inclusion of more student voices in its evaluation.

The final two case studies in this section both describe blended approaches to popular Cambridge ESOL teaching qualifications; the DELTA (module one only) and the CELTA. In the DELTA case study, Sally Hirst and Tom Godfrey emphasize how the blended approach has led to more flexibility, but also more complexity and a greater workload for course providers. Jacqueline Douglas and Colin Paton note that the blended CELTA is very new, so are tentative in their conclusions, but they indicate that the blended format may have made assessment more objective, and allowed more time for reflection on input sessions. Neither of these case studies directly presents details of student feedback, although the chapter on the CELTA notes that “formal feedback overall was extremely positive from trainees and tutors” (p. 121).

ESP is the theme for the next six chapters of the volume, and the first of these is a description by Nergiz Kern of podcasts being incorporated into a blended approach to teaching English to

taxi drivers in Turkey. This study is interesting in that the online component involved taxi drivers using their phones to study during quiet times at work; most of the other case studies in this volume do not give explicit attention to exactly how students can fit online study around other commitments. The author states that the blended format made the course a success, but no student feedback is directly reported.

In the next chapter, Lynda Beagle and Graeme Davies report on a blended approach to English courses for the aviation industry. The format described is essentially one of an online course, supplemented with periodic tutorials, which are intended to guide future engagement with the online materials. The authors highlight the flexibility of this arrangement in terms of fitting in around busy work schedules, but again no student feedback on the course is directly reported.

Chapter 13 outlines a blended learning approach taken to teaching English language presentation and report writing skills to Armenian diplomats. Andy Keedwell describes how the format was a reaction to limited teacher availability for contact hours, as well as the erratic schedules of the diplomats. He reports that, although participants were initially sceptical about the format, 90% of them rated the course as being of high quality in their post-course evaluation.

Next, Edward Russell describes the blended learning approach adopted by the British Council for Business English courses delivered to Siemens in Bulgaria. As in some of the previous chapters, the iterative nature of course development is emphasized in this case study, with the developments over six iterations clearly illustrated in table form. While student feedback data on the most recent version of the course is not presented, it is provided for third iteration, with the data suggesting generally high levels of student satisfaction.

In chapter 15, Louise Ingham outlines the use of a wiki to supplement a face-to-face business English course held in England for foreign learners. As with many of the other courses described in this volume, flexibility

of delivery is one of the key reasons for given adding an online component to the course. The author evaluates the course through personal reflection, but it is not clear what students' feedback may have indicated about the blend.

Chapter 16 is written by one of the volume's editors, Claire Whittaker, who details a blended approach to teaching English to military personnel in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Interestingly, the blend she describes includes three components: face-to-face, computer, and self-study. She makes a case that, in actuality, many blending learning formats include a self-study element, but this is not always clearly labelled as such in the literature. As with some of the other case studies, the iterative nature of blend development is emphasized, with the final version described being the result of three years of gradual adjustment. In terms of the success of the course, the author writes that it achieved "good results" (p. 182), but states that she is unable to provide details of these in the report.

The fourth and final section of this volume is concerned with EFL/GE blended learning courses. Alexander Sokol, Edgar Lasevich, Renata Jonina and Marija Dobrovolska-Stoian open this section with a description of a GE course for upper secondary students in Latvia. In their situation, an online component was added to a face-to-face course, with one of the main aims being to "provide learners with extra opportunities for learning" (p. 189). In contrast to a number of the other case studies in this volume, this report describes the methods used to collect student feedback on the course, and presents a clear summary of main points from this feedback.

Chapter 18 by Liz Fleet describes the implementation of a blended learning English course for postgraduate university students in Cairo, Egypt. She cites a desire to increase English input and to give students the best possible access to learning during unstable political times as major motivations for adopting a blended approach. Overall, the author reports that students appreciated the blend, with "72 per cent regarding it as 'good' or 'very good'" (p. 204).

The penultimate chapter of this volume is written by Hatice Bilgin. It is unique in that, rather than being a typical case study, it describes a planned intervention study undertaken at a Turkish university to examine the effectiveness of a blended approach to teaching English. The results presented indicate that the experimental group in the study outperformed the control group; however, as the author mentions, it is not clear whether this difference was due to online materials used, or just to the extra total study time that the experimental group students had.

Astrid Krake presents the final case study of the book by describing the application of blended learning in the context of adult education English courses in Germany. She details the challenges in introducing an online component to face-to-face provision, and then presents a thorough account of the feedback received on the courses from teachers and learners. This feedback generally indicated a positive response to the innovations reported.

The conclusion of the volume, written by Claire Whittaker, brings together some of the theoretical background from the introduction with a meta-analysis of the case studies in order to provide key points of advice for teachers considering adopting a blended learning approach. This section is clearly laid out under four headings: context; course design; learners, teachers and tutors; and evaluating and developing the blend. The conclusion ends with a restating of the publication's aim to be a useful resource that offers constructive advice on practical course design issues. An appendix containing a list of useful questions for course designers is also included.

Overall, this publication appears to achieve its goal of being a useful resource for practitioners. The case studies presented cover a very wide range of contexts, and it seems likely that most teachers considering implementing a blended approach will be able to find a chapter

that has some similarities to their own situation. The only real weakness of the collection is the lack of transparent student feedback in a number of the case studies; without seeing this, it is difficult to evaluate convincingly the success or otherwise of some of the blends presented. However, in those studies with no student feedback, the authors do offer personal reflective evaluations on their courses, which usually give some indication of perceived student response. Even considering this limitation, the multitude of different real-life examples in the volume should provide readers with plenty of ideas that can be incorporated into their own course designs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

"Blended Learning in English Language Teaching: Course Design and Implementation" is freely available online at: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications/blended-learning-english-language-teaching-course-design-implementation-0>

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