

Enhancing Blends and Linguistics Courses

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Abstract

Linguistics courses in universities are largely dependent on lecturing where the professors explain linguistic theories and dry ideas to students. If students are lucky, they may get a chance to do some practice. This often takes the form of exercises or analyses that students prepare at home and discuss in class. Consequently, students consider linguistics courses boring. The paper describes a case study where Blended Learning (BL) techniques are used to enhance the teaching of linguistics. By the end of the course the success of these techniques is measured through two of the five Sloan-C pillars namely, learning effectiveness and student satisfaction. The findings suggest that BL enriches the teaching and learning environment leading to better results.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Technology Enhanced Learning Environment, Moodle, Sloan Pillars

1. Introduction

Though most humanities courses have relied on technology for a while, yet using technology to teach linguistics is not quite common. Even some scholars have wondered about the possibility of teaching linguistics online (Johnson & Palmer, 2015). In most cases, professors believe that linguistics courses should rely on Face to Face (F2F) mode. This can be attributed to concerns over the possibility of teaching such sub fields as phonology and syntax without the immediate interaction with the professor. This paper describes a case study where BL is used as a midway between traditional F2F mode where the professor meets students on regular basis and online mode of teaching where the professor does not meet students at all. Though BL has attracted the attention of several researchers, yet combining F2F teaching with technology, to improve the learning outcomes of linguistics courses, has not attracted enough attention from scholars. This study pinpoints new ways to teach linguistics using technology. It describes a fifteen-week upper level course on Global Englishes.

The paper sheds light on a BL learning linguistics course where students merit from F2F interaction and technology. The course is offered in a lab and depends on Moodle as a learning management system (LMS) to serve two purposes. The first is enhancing the teaching process through several authentic online media such as videos, podcasts, etc. The second is assessing students in a different way through various online assignments, quizzes, realtime quizzes, forums, etc. By the end of the course the success of this technique is measured through two of the five Sloan-C pillars (Lorenzo & Moore, 2002) namely, learning effectiveness and student satisfaction. This is evaluated in two ways: average course grades and a survey where students reflect on their learning experience.

2. Literature Review

The present study investigates how changes in teaching and learning environment can affect the results of the learning process. Hence a proper understanding of the variables or the elements involved in the learning environment is necessary. The following section sheds light on how researches categorize the interaction among these variables.

2.1. Teaching and Learning Environment

The academic environment, where students are asked to learn, has long attracted the attention of researchers. Categorizing the variables included in the learning environment and understanding the role of each represents the first step. As early as 1987, Chickering and Gamson created the ‘Seven Principles of Good Practice’ which emphasize: student-faculty communication, collaboration among students, active learning, appropriate feedback, setting a time limit for each task, high expectations, and different learning styles. Biggs (1989) states that the learning process is the interaction between three variables: presage, process and product. Presage refers to factors existing prior to the time of learning such as course design and students’ characteristics. Process encompasses the various ways in which students approach their learning and product includes all the learning outcomes, their assessment and students’ satisfaction. Figure (1) gives a general model of student learning: (Biggs J. , 1987, p. 9)

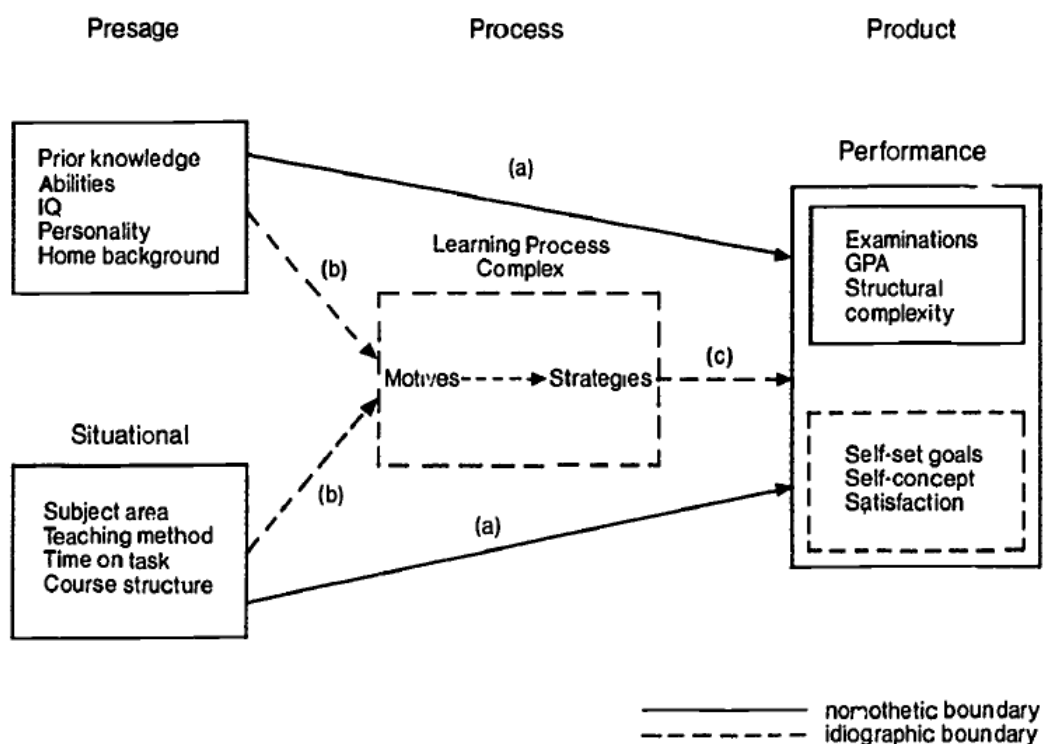


Figure 1. Student learning model. This figure illustrates the variables involved in the learning process as expounded by Biggs (1987).

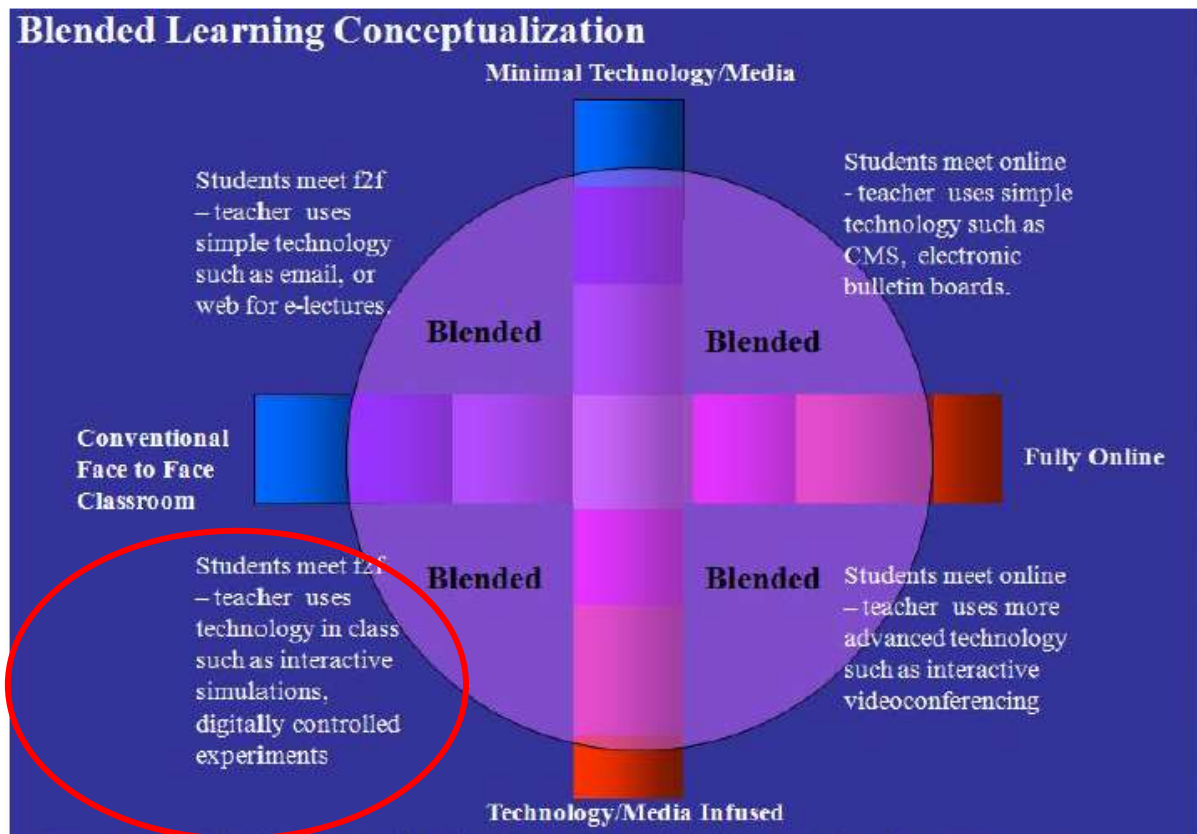
During the 1990s, researchers started to focus on different ways of enhancing the learning environment to achieve better results. Other studies (Bennett, Dunne, & Carre, 1998) and (Arnold, Loan-Clark, Harrington, & Hunt, 1999) have investigated the impact of the learning environment on generic capabilities or core competencies. As part of the Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses Project, a collaborative project between Edinburgh, Durham and Coventry Universities in Britain, Entwistle, McCune, & Hounsell (2002) relate the quality of learning achieved to both the presentation of course material and the learning environment provided. Such emphasis on enhancing teaching and learning environment coincide with a rapid growth in the Internet and the spread of Technology Enhanced Learning Environments (TELE).

2.2. Technology Enhanced Learning Environment

Research on using technology in education dates to the late 1990s. Based on over 700 empirical research studies, Schacter (1999) concludes that students with access to educational technology show better results in all types of tests. TELEs can be defined as “technology-based learning and instructional systems through which students acquire skills or knowledge, usually with the help of teachers or facilitators, learning support tools, and technological resources” (Wang & Hannafin, 2005, p. 5). In recent years, higher education institutions have started to realize that students prefer technology-enhanced learning experiences over traditional ones. “[T]he introduction of online media into a course or programme, while at the same time recognising that there is merit in retaining face-to-face contact” (Macdonald, 2008, p. 2) is referred to as BL. It was listed as one of the top ten trends in knowledge delivery by the American Society for Training and Development (Finn, 2002).

The terms hybrid learning, mixed-mode instruction or BL can be used interchangeably to refer to any type of course that combines traditional classrooms with information and communication technologies (ICT) (Graham, 2005). This usually happens through a Course Management System (CMS) or a Learning Management System (LMS) such as Moodle or Blackboard. Graham and Dziuban (2008) state that adopting BL courses leads to “(1) improved learning effectiveness, (2) increased access and convenience, and (3) greater cost effectiveness” (p. 270). In BL courses the Internet supports Face to Face instruction “in the belief that the incorporation of new information and communication technologies may lead to more efficient and effective education” (Lopez-Perez, Perez-Lopez, Rodriguez-Ariza, & Argente-Linares, 2013, p. 625). Poon (2013) reports on the positive impact of BL on academic achievement.

There are different types of blends and each of them serves a specific purpose (Graham & Robison, 2007). The different types of blends represent a continuum where at one end there are courses that are mostly online and F2F content is limited and at the other end one can find courses that are highly dependent on F2F interaction supplemented with few online resources or activities. This is best represented by the BL conceptualization provided by Picciano (2007) and given in figure 2.



Adapted from (Picciano, 2007, p. 9)

Figure2. Blended Learning Conceptualization

The course under investigation falls within the circled part in the diagram above, hence it is an enhancing blend where technology is used to improve pedagogy and enrich productivity. Seat time is not reduced but technology is used to enhance the learning process through different types of activities and material.

The LMS used in this study is an open source course management system known as Moodle which is an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment. According to Moodle statistics, there are 61,202 registered Moodle sites and more than 8 million courses in 213 countries. The top three countries by registration are the United States, Spain, and Brazil (Moodle statistics, 2015). The “socio-constructivist pedagogy” design of Moodle has created an environment that allows collaborative interaction among students and additions to traditional classroom instruction (Brandl, 2005). Moodle enables instructors to provide guidance for their learners step by step. Information is provided in small units, students are assessed, and instructors can then accordingly decide whether to proceed to the next step or not.

3. Methodology: Course Preparation and Design

The paper describes a case study of a fifteen-week course entitled “English and Globalization”. This course falls within the scope of sociolinguistics. It explores social, political, linguistic and educational issues related to the spread of English in the world. In addition to colonialism, the course examines the role of

globalization in the emergence of English as an international language. The course is offered in a lab so even in-class activities are done online via Moodle.

King and Arnold (2012) distinguish between course preparation and course design as two steps that should precede teaching blended courses. Course preparation is defined as “any action taken by the professor to learn about blended models and best practices before creating and while teaching of a blended course” (King & Arnold, 2012, p. 50). In this case, the professor has been using Moodle to teach academic writing for six semesters before opting to use it for teaching linguistics. Hence, not much time was required for course preparation. Course design, on the other hand, required a lot of time and effort since this was the first time to offer a linguistics course in a lab and the literature on using technology to teach linguistics is scarce. Course design is based on the five key ingredients of a blended learning course as expounded by Carman (2005). These are live events, online content, collaboration, assessments, and reference materials. The following table gives details on each of these components and how it was covered.

Table 1:

Course Ingredients

Course Ingredients	Details
Live Events	The F2F component of the course Regular F2F meetings for 45 minutes three times every week for fifteen weeks An interactive projector which facilitated incorporating videos, audio, etc. in slideshows.
Online Content	A PowerPoint on each strand Course readings Links to different strand activities on the companion website of the book Online activities Assignments Realtime quizzes Quizzes
Collaboration	Group presentations Projects
Assessments	Short Assignments Quizzes Mid-term project Final project
Reference Materials	Textbook: <i>Global Englishes: A Resource Book for Students</i> , 3rd Edition By Jennifer Jenkins Readings and references available on the Moodle course page

A week by week plan was also prepared to make sure that all the five ingredients of the course are properly distributed and to achieve some balance between live events and online content. The details of this week by week progress plan are given in appendix A.

4. Results

In the mid-1990s, the Sloan C pillars were created as “a framework for measuring and improving an online program within any institution” (Lorenzo & Moore, 2002, p. 3). Though these pillars are originally designed to evaluate and develop online courses, yet they have proved useful in evaluating blended learning (Vignare, 2007). Sloan-C’s five pillars are: learning effectiveness, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, cost effectiveness, and access. The current study focuses on learning effectiveness and student satisfaction to evaluate the efficacy of BL techniques in teaching linguistics.

4.1. Learning Effectiveness

Graham and Dziuban (2008) argue that learning effectiveness can be measured through grades and withdrawal rates. A total of 18 students registered for the course and none of them dropped. This is quite remarkable because usually 1-2% of the students enrolled in a course drop after few weeks. The overall average grade of students is 80.7% (B-) which is the average grade for most courses at the university where the course was offered. Table 2 gives an anonymous summary of students’ grades as extracted from the Moodle gradebook.

Table 2 Students’ Grades

Attendance	Quiz:Stran	Quiz:Stran	Quiz:Spok	Quiz:Stran	Assignmer	Extra_crec	Category t	Assignmer	Assignmer	Assignmer	Academic	Category t	Category t	Turnitin As	Assignmer	Course tot
9.12	11	9	15	9	9	2	16.42	9.5	8.5	8	5	17.71	8.5	17	17	85.75
9.12	2	8	19	8.5	8	2	14.18	9.5	6	8	5	16.29	8	15	17.5	80.08
9.41	11	5	16	8	8	2	14.93	8	7	9	5	16.57	8	16	15.5	80.41
7.35	9.5	9	18	8.5	8	2	16.42	7	0	8.5	5	11.71	8.5	14	17	74.99
9.12	11.5	8	19	7.5	9	2	17.01	8.5	7.5	8	5	16.57	8	17	16	83.7
9.41	14.5	10	19	9	9	2	18.96	8.5	9.5	8.5	5	18	9	19	19	93.37
8.24	11.5	9	18	9	9	2	17.46	8.5	0	7.5	5	12	8.5	13	16	75.2
9.39	13	6	19	7.5	9	2	16.87	9.5	7	7	5	16.29	8	17	14	81.55
8.79	11.5	7	18	9	9.5	2	17.01	8	9	7	5	16.57	8.5	19	17.5	87.37
7.94	12	10	16	-	9	2	17.19	8.5	8	9	5	17.43	8.5	19	15	85.06
9.12	13	5	18	9	8	2	16.42	9	8.5	8.5	5	17.71	9	16	17	85.25
7.94	6	4	19	9	0	2	11.94	8	8.5	9	5	17.43	8	18	17	80.31
8.82	11	8	18	9	9	2	17.01	9.5	8	7.5	5	17.14	9	17	18	86.98
8.53	13.5	9	20	9	9.5	2	18.81	8.5	8.5	0	5	12.57	6	18	17	80.91
10	7	1	12	9	8	2	11.64	7	8	8	5	16	8	14	14	73.64
9.09	9	5	12	7.5	8	2	12.99	7	0	8	5	11.43	8	15	13.5	70
9.09	9.5	9	16	8.5	8	2	15.82	7	0	8	5	11.43	7.5	15	0	58.84
9.12	10	9	18	8.5	9	2	16.87	8	9.5	9.5	5	18.29	8.5	19	18.5	90.27

4.2. Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction quality pillar is often related to “technology infrastructure and support, interaction with faculty and other students, learning community and course/learning outcomes” (Vignare, 2007, p. 10). This pillar is often measured through surveys targeting students and investigating their perceptions of BL. By the end of the course the instructor used the Feedback feature available via Moodle to measure student satisfaction about the course. Appendix B gives the details of all the questions used for Feedback. When asked about using Turnitin for submitting their work, 54.55% find it extremely useful, 36.36 % find it useful, and 9.09% find it unhelpful. When asked about Moodle as an LMS, 63.6% of the students think that it is extremely useful while 36.4% think that it is useful but none describe it as unhelpful. When asked

about taking a linguistics course in a lab 90% of the students agree that it enhances their learning experience through videos and audios.

Examining the findings related to both learning effectiveness and student satisfaction. It is quite clear that enhancing blends can in fact enhance the teaching of linguistics through providing students with different kinds of material and activities. Professors teaching linguistics in higher education institutions should not banish technology outside their classes. If used properly, technology can revolutionize the teaching of linguistics leading to better course outcomes.

4.3. Limitations of the Study

Though the findings of the study support enhancing blends as an effective way of teaching linguistics, it should be noted that this case study is based on only one course. It should also be noted that the population of students involved is limited (only 18 students enrolled in the course). The study focuses on a course intended to teach global Englishes that is why using audio and video plays a vital role in enriching the course as it exposes them to different varieties and dialects. However, this may not work for all branches of linguistics.

5. Pointers for Future Research

The use of technology in higher education institution is no longer a luxury or a future step; in fact it has become a reality that our students know more about technology than their professors:

- More research is needed to help both professors and students adopt technology.
- Researchers should focus on ways of developing and designing courses in a way that makes utmost use of technology. In many cases, the professors are left to struggle with new technology and the need to develop online courses.
- Students' needs and learning styles should also be addressed in future research on BL.
- Publishers should aim at producing books that suit this technological leap.

Finally, professors should realize that technology can be used to teach any discipline. Integrating technology in higher education mainly needs careful planning and thorough course design.

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Appendix A
A Week by Week Progress Plan

Week	Material Covered
Week One 1/2/2015	Introduction to the course A1: The historical, social, and political context B1: The legacy of colonialism
Week Two 8/2/ 2015	C1: Postcolonial Africa and North America D1: The discourses of postcolonialism Activities and Revision
Week three 15/2/2015	Activities and Revision A2: Who speaks English today? B2: The English Today debate
Week Four 22/2/2015	C2: Teaching and testing global Englishes D2: Who owns English today? Activities and Revision National & Liberation Days
Week Five 1/3/2015	A3: Standard language ideology in the Anglophone world B3: Standards across Anglophone space C3: Standards across channels
Week Six 8/3/2015	D3: Is language (still) power in the Inner Circle? Activities and Revision
Week Seven 15/3/2015	A4: Variation across post-colonial Englishes B4: 'Legitimate' and 'illegitimate' offspring of English C4: 'Sub'-varieties of English: the example of Singlish
Week Eight 22/3/2015	D4: From language to literature Activities and Revision A5: Pidgin and creole languages
Week Nine 29/3/2015	B5: Characteristics of pidgin and creole languages Activities and Revision Midterm Project due
Week Ten 12/4/2015	D5: The status of pidgin languages in education A6: English as an international lingua franca B6: The nature of ELF communication
Week Eleven 19/4/2015	C6: ELF and education D6: The challenge of testing ELF

	Activities and Revision
Week Twelve 26/4/2015	A7: English in Asia and Europe B7: En route to new standard Englishes C7: Asian Englishes: focus on India, Hong Kong and China
Week Thirteen 3/5/2015	D7: Attitudes to non-native Englishes in China and mainland Europe Activities and Revision A8: The future of Global Englishes
Week Fourteen 10/5/2015	B8: Possible future scenarios C8: Language killer or language promoter? D8: Looking ahead
Week Fifteen 17/5/2015	Activities and Revision Final project
Week Sixteen 24/5/2015	Final Project

Appendix B Survey Questions

1. What would you like to do in class?
 - a. Analyze texts based on linguistic concepts discussed
 - b. Write a response to a linguistic idea explained
 - c. Listen to detailed explanations of linguistic ideas/ theories
2. How do you evaluate using turnitin.com for submitting your work
 - a. Extremely useful
 - b. Useful
 - c. Unhelpful
3. How do you evaluate using Moodle as a learning management system as far as getting slides and supplementary material for the course?
 - a. Extremely useful
 - b. Useful
 - c. Unhelpful
4. How do you rate Moodle as a learning management system as far as Keeping track of your attendance?
 - a. Extremely useful
 - b. Useful
 - c. Unhelpful
5. Taking a linguistics course in a lab
 - a. Enhanced the course because we watched videos and listened to conversations
 - b. Did not affect me as a student I did not need the videos
 - c. Bothered me as a student
6. I would describe this course as a

- a. Useless course
 - b. Useful but not related to my needs as a student
 - c. Useful and related to my needs
 - d. Extremely boring
7. The Best thing about the content of the course was.....
8. The thing I really disliked about the course was.....