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## **TEACHING THROUGH THE BLENDED MODE OF LEARNING: BENEFITS, ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

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**ABSTRACT:** The concepts of online and blended learning have gained considerable importance in academia and programmes are developed where educational concepts are presented by utilizing the said modes. The idea of blended learning revolves around an education programme in which information is shared through an intermix of online media and face-to-face interaction with the instructor. The blended mode of teaching and learning makes students autonomous learners as they face the challenges to adjust between online and face to face interaction. The interaction also engages them in critical inquiry as they investigate learning materials presented through an unconventional mode.

Blended mode of learning is well suited for university students where the possibility of experiencing self-directed learning runs supreme. The paper, therefore, discusses the results of the efficacy of the blended mode of learning as experienced by undergraduate students at a private university. In addition, the paper also highlights the issues and challenges that impede the successful implementation of blended learning programmes in higher education. Moreover, the paper also gives recommendations for the smooth integration of the blended mode of learning for various education programmes at the university level.

**Key words:** blended learning, English language teaching, online mode, higher education

### **INTRODUCTION**

The goal of education is to prepare individuals who can make rapid yet smooth adjustments in society. This is only possible if education standards keep pace with the changing world and modify themselves according to the changing realities. Zinsar (2012) opines the same and states that since technology and globalization are transforming the world into one interconnected society, a new set of skills – in fact, a new education – is needed for future citizens. These new set of skills are incomplete without ample weight given to technological literacy. Technological literacy is, “the ability to use, manage, evaluate and understand technology.” (ITEA, 2006, p.4). In education, it has therefore, become incumbent that literacy skills combine with technological skills to create a new educational paradigm. Co-existence with technology has become a vital need and therefore ways need to be paved for the smooth amalgamation of technology in education.

Use of technology not only adds value to the educational process but also extends students an opportunity to experience learning beyond the borders of a traditional teaching learning set up. One of such active technological fields is the blended learning (BL) mode. Krasnova and Sidorenko (2013) define BL as a method of teaching that combines the most effective face-to-face (f2f) teaching techniques and online interactive collaboration, both constituting a system that functions in constant correlation and forms a single environment.

Blended mode of learning can be successfully integrated in the education domain at all levels, however, at the tertiary level it significantly carves out a niche for itself. Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal (2004) state that BL offers potential for genuine transformation in higher education. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) further imply that BL plays a very important role in transforming and promoting the quality of higher education. Tian and Fu (2004) view BL as one of the top trends in knowledge dissemination. Through BL, education thus comes out of a traditional single mode operation and is transmitted through multiple modalities. This multiple mode operation is necessary to face the existing challenges that a modern day world offers to students. It makes them autonomous learners on one hand and brings learning to their door step. Students access quality education in their own time

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frameworks and without the rigours of f2f learning all the time. Moreover, self-paced learning brings self-discipline and provides more time for critical reflection. Both are key expectations in higher education.

### **Background of the Problem**

In institutions of higher learning it is becoming increasingly difficult to meaningfully engage students with skills and subjects that do not directly impact the core technical areas. One such area is the learning and teaching of English language. English language, though a compulsory requirement at the undergraduate level, has failed to gain attention and merit as students as well as institutions consider it as a subsidiary compulsion. Krasnova and Sidorenko (2013) opine the same and lament that in spite of the understanding of the language importance it is not in priority for a technical institution. Johnson and Marsh (2014) also hint at the unclear sense of the importance of EFL for professional development. Moreover, what students and institutions fail to conjecture is that English as a medium of instruction is a highly important skill to develop as it cross cuts through all disciplines and is a major source of effective and professional communication. Adequate and systematic learning of English enables students to successfully cope with the rigours of academic courses and prepares them to articulate their thoughts well at a professional level.

As a marginalized area of learning it is highly desirable to teach English language through the provision of pedagogical variety and inclusion of an unconventional mode like BL. The said paradigm shift will attract student attention and benefit the educational process as a result.

### **Statement of Problem**

The overpowering presence of technology has exerted an influence on all aspects of human life. Education cannot remain distant from the prevailing reality. Rather than staying aloof it is a prudent step to move forward and benefit from the powers of technology, BL in particular. As an instructional tool it makes students the center of learning and makes them experience educational autonomy, pedagogical variety, and self-reflection. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) suggest that BL provides a more engaged learning experience to students.

In institutions of higher learning, the teaching of English language has emerged as an enormous challenge as students do not regard it as a major focus area as it is not a subject that directly impacts their professional and technical knowledge. Moreover, the instructional input given for the teaching of English is not stimulating and challenging enough to generate interest in the said skill. Further, no innovative processes including the BL mode have been investigated in the past to improve the teaching and learning of English

This small scale research study looks at the possibility of introducing the BL mode of instruction for the teaching of English at an undergraduate level. The study is based on the premise that a shift in instructional practice from a total f2f to BL may generate more interest among students about language learning, make them avid language learners and increase their language competence with respect to oral communication skills. Moreover, the study endeavours to explore the challenges and issues that may arise during the BL process.

### **Literature Review**

Blended learning is an underutilized medium in academia despite the fact that it offers rich opportunities for learning. Higgins and Gomez (2014) opine the same and state that BL is often under-used by academics and students. However, a lot of potential exists in terms of utilizing the online medium of instruction with f2f learning. Watson (2008) opines that BL combines the online delivery of educational content with the best features of classroom interaction and live instruction in such a way as to personalize learning, allow thoughtful reflection, and differentiate instruction from student to student across a diverse group of learners. This is specifically meaningful in higher education where the nature of courses taught demand a certain kind of autonomy and independent thinking. Garrison and Kanuka's (2004) explore the benefits of BL in higher education and state that the incorporation of it in higher education programmes redefines the role of higher education institutions as they move towards more learner centered and self-directed modes of teaching and learning.

The incorporation of BL in English language teaching is a widely acceptable tool in higher education. Whittaker (2013) defines blended language learning (BLL) as a particular teaching and learning environment where the f2f is combined with computer assisted language learning (CALL). Sharma and Barrett (2007) exemplify BLL as f2f teaching with an appropriate use of technology. Dudeney and Hockly (as cited in Whittaker, 2013) explain BLL as a mixture of f2f and online course delivery. The possibility of BLL is thus a widely acknowledged phenomenon in terms of enhancing and facilitating language learning at the tertiary level.

BL thus affords students the opportunity to experiment with learning in a computer-generated mode together with f2f interaction with the instructor. Woodall (2010) values the benefits of a virtual classroom and indicates that a virtual classroom allows instructors and learners to be in different places at the same time. It also allows the instructor to archive the event for later viewing. This definitely allows extensive time for better reflection and analysis as teachers and students can both reclus and carefully examine the shared material and discourse patterns. There are studies that authenticate the successful application of BLL with positive results. Huang and Li (2014) successfully implement a unit of English teaching through the BL mode consisting of class preparation, classroom teaching and after-class assignment. The results show that learners perform better in cooperation awareness and learner autonomy. Higgins and Gomez (2014) share a successful BL module on English studies where students together with f2f teaching worked online to post their analysis of poetry and blogging on topics related to modules. The said exercise is reported to have enhanced their experience of the module. Jin, Zhang and Shen (2012) share an empirical study, on a writing course, where the combination of f2f and online course seems to have lessened the writing anxiety among students and increased their confidence. Sharma (2007) advocates the use of classroom instruction with online practice. He further envisages the use of BL in language teaching through the use of websites in which pages can be edited, creation of computer audio files and blogs. Liu and Zha (2009) quote a study focused on English learning motivation and strategies under BL environment. The results taken from 800 students show positive effect of BL on students' English performance and learning motivation.

The benefits of BLL are immense as they give way to self-directed learning and prepare students to take charge of their learning. However, the challenges that may beset the said mode of learning cannot be overlooked. So and Bonk (2010) rightly claim that blended teaching and learning offer a complex and challenging new model for many teachers, as well as their students. At the fore set, students may not be motivated enough to self-regulate themselves while doing online work. Traditional f2f classrooms also take the spirit out of them to self-direct their learning and experience independent learning paradigm. Johnson and Marsh (2014) hint at lack of autonomous motivation, time management, patience with slow to load online applications and importance of online work as major challenges in the successful implementation of BLL. Moreover, lack of teacher preparedness in handling BLL comes out as another impediment towards the successful running of the said programmes. Teachers need to re-envisage their roles in order to teach with improved and modern pedagogy. Senior (2010) points at the same need and reiterates that BL offers teachers an opportunity to deal with the changing roles of teachers in the 21st century and requires a reconsideration of the "valuable part they play in supporting the learning opportunities of their students in our progressively interconnected world." (p.146) Garrett (2009) too points at the requirement of well-trained language teachers for better student learning outcomes. Ocak (2011) claims that sometimes inadequate clarification of roles in blended courses confuses both teachers and students and therefore lead to problems of content delivery and online application of skills. The need therefore is to initiate BLL with absolute professional skill so that maximum benefit can be derived from it and the challenges minimized for effective outcomes.

Güzer and Caner (2014) thus perceive BL as a useful, enjoyable, supportive, flexible tool for learning. Marsh (2012) is of the view that BL offers language teachers a different range of learning opportunities through the use of technology. Ruthven-Stuart (2003) cites a study in which a poll taken from 300 language teachers from 36 countries consider CALL as a complement to classroom teaching. The need is therefore is to seamlessly incorporate the online component of language with f2f to achieve the desired results and reach optimum student learning.

## **Research Methodology**

The study is based on the premise that language can be learnt effectively through the BL mode by complementing classroom teaching with the online component of language learning. The preferred strategy affords students an opportunity to practice language independent of the teacher and in one's own time framework.

The study which made BLL mode of learning as its basis was conceptualized and practiced with one batch of undergraduate business studies' students at a private sector university. The research design for the purpose of this small scale study was qualitative in nature. Qualitative research involves highly detailed but rich descriptions of human behaviours and opinions (Savenye & Robinson, 1996). Moreover, this particular study followed the observational case study approach towards the investigation of the stated phenomenon. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003) a case study is a detailed examination of one setting, or one single subject, or one single depository of documents, or one particular event. McMillan (2008) defines an observational case study as a type of case study where the participant observation is the primary method of gathering data to study a particular entity or some aspect of the entity.

## **The Intervention**

The BLL approach was applied in the two Oral and Communication Skills (OCPS) language sections of the BBA programs. The BL programme was brought in by an outside agency and the scheme of studies was merged with the regular OCPS course requirements. The objectives of the regular OCPS course was to focus on various aspects of oral communication and public speaking. The BL approach was used in the first 12 weeks of the course where the f2f learning components, proposed by the outside agency, were reinforced through the online mode. The concepts taught through f2f learning were given as online exercises for practice. Together with the BL mode the regular teaching of the OCPS course also continued. The intervention is diagrammatically presented below:

<b>12 weeks (36 hours)</b>		<b>3 weeks (9 hours)</b>	
Regular OCPS	+	BL f2f + Online Exercises	Regular OCPS

**Figure 1. Oral communication and Presentation Skills (OCPS) Course for 15 weeks**

### Sampling Procedure

The type of sampling procedure used for the purpose of this particular study was purposeful. According to McMillan (2008) in qualitative studies participants were selected purposefully. He went on to claim that in purposeful sampling, the researcher selected particular individuals or cases because they would be particularly informative about the topic. 37 students were selected from the two sections of the OCPS class to participate in the study. All the selected students were students of the undergraduate business programme of a private sector university.

### Data Collection Tools

After the students underwent the intervention for a period of 12 weeks, questionnaires were distributed to gauge their responses on the BLL sessions, the technical quality of the online component, the quality of learning through the BL mode and their satisfaction with the BLL mode. Moreover, focused group interview and feedback was also taken from students regarding the BLL sessions and their oral communication was also analyzed for the examination of the content learnt through the online session.

### Data Analysis

In qualitative research, “data analysis means the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findings” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p.147). Data analysis, therefore, involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns. This process is known as categorical aggregation which according to Stake (as cited in McMillan, 2008) is a process in which the data is coded and instances are collected from which meanings emerge. The data collected through questionnaires, focused group interview and examination of language content used in quizzes was codified and information synthesized for analysis.

The various forms of data collection tools used in the study also rendered credibility to the data through triangulation. McMillan (2008) calls triangulation one of the most common techniques to enhance the credibility of a qualitative study. Triangulation renders credibility to qualitative studies through comparison of findings by using various data collection techniques. The idea of triangulation is based on the premise that a single method of data collection exposes the data to researcher’s bias and, therefore, more than one method is necessary to counter check the credibility of the data and findings. The same was done in the study for the verification of data and achieve fuller understanding of the phenomenon under study.

## RESULTS and FINDINGS

The following section will outline the results of the study. The results are derived from questionnaires, focused group interviews and analysis of quizzes taken for online work:

Table 1 shares the results of students’ responses on the effectiveness and appropriacy of BLL materials

**Table 1. Effectiveness and Appropriacy of BLL materials**

How did you find the online component of the British Council LEP course?	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Effective</b>	<b>Appropriate</b>	<b>Ineffective</b>	<b>Very ineffective</b>
	0%	30%	46%	19%	2.7%
How would you rate the structure and content of the British Council LEP course?	<b>Very Difficult</b>	<b>Difficult</b>	<b>Appropriate</b>	<b>Easy</b>	<b>Very easy</b>
	0%	13.5%	35%	40.5%	10.8%
The British Council LEP course was useful in the improvement of your oral communication skills.	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
	0%	27%	27%	46%	0%
The material was not interesting and/or challenging enough	13.5%	11%	30%	21.67%	0%
The website had technical problems	16.2%	38%	32%	11%	2.7%
It was difficult to attempt online work with full course load.	21.6%	27%	24.3%	11%	0%
I was not regular in practicing the British Council online materials	2.7%	24.3%	19%	29.7%	5.4%
With appropriate changes, would you like to learn and practice language through the blended learning mode?	2.7%	51%	24.3%	0%	5.4%

Table 2 shares the results of students' responses on the contribution of the BLL course in improving English language skills.

**Table 2. Contribution of the BLL course in improving English language skills**

Skills	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
<b>Writing</b>	<b>2.7%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>40.5%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Reading</b>	<b>5.4%</b>	<b>59.4%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>2.7%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Oral Communication</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>2.7%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Grammar</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>40.5%</b>	<b>21.6%</b>	<b>2.7%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Vocabulary</b>	<b>16.2%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>40.5%</b>	<b>16.2%</b>	<b>0%</b>

Table 3 outlines the responses of students' with respect to the preference for more online language learning courses

**Table 3. Preference for more online language learning courses**

Yes	No
62%	38%

Table 4 shares the results of the weight given to language skills in quizzes

**Table 4. Assessment of Quizzes**

Quizzes	Reading Comprehension	Grammar	Pronunciation	Vocabulary	OCPS
Quiz 1	22%	67%	11%	0%	0%
Quiz 2	22%	67%	0%	0%	0%
Quiz 3	55%	44%	0%	0%	0%
Quiz 4	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
Quiz 5	25%	50%	0%	17%	0%
Average	34.8%	55.6%	2.2%	3.4%	0%

### Analysis of the Study

The following section will present a cross analysis of the study through the results generated from questionnaires, focused group interview and student work:

#### *Positive attitude towards the BLL mode of teaching*

Most of the students responded positively to the introduction of the BLL mode of learning. 51% of the students showed eagerness to learn language through the BL mode and 61% of students wanted to have more BL courses. This response was taken in a positive regard as BL mode was introduced for the first time in contrast to typical f2f learning. In a study, Leakey and Ranchoux (2006) also reported that students found the BLL experience positive and motivating and more preferable to a traditional classroom.

The students, therefore, accepted the challenge and regarded it as an innovative and progressive tool to augment language learning. However, some students in their interviews highlighted the need for more modifications to align the contents of the course well with the specific objectives of the course. Hancock and Wong (2012) supported the BL approach and regarded it as an effective strategy aimed at meeting the challenges of the modern and technological world.

### ***Language challenge presented by the BLL course***

As outlined in the results most students found the course contents of the BLL mode easy and not challenging enough. 40.5% of the students received the content as easy and 10.8% regarded it as very easy. On the contrary, 35% perceived it as appropriate. The interviews taken from the students reiterated the fact that the content of the BLL course was very easy and did not pose enough challenge to the students. One of the students reported that the contents were, “very basic and repetitive”. (Personal Communication, November 20, 2015). Moreover, the students generally got excellent marks on the assessments set on the online quizzes. Very few of them secured below average marks. This pointed at the lack of challenge posed by the online materials as they students effortlessly obtained above average marks.

The said responses pointed at the lack of planning and preparedness by the outside agency to align and develop the materials according to the needs of the students. On one hand, the BL mode of course operation was well received by the students, but there was clear dissatisfaction with the course contents and the language challenge they posed.

### ***BLL Course and Its suitability with the OCPS course expectations***

The results of the study indicated that generally students accepted the integration of the BLL component in their regular OCPS course, however, they did not regard the materials as suitable to the needs of an OCPS course. 46% of the students felt that the contents of the course did not improve their oral communication skills. 35% of the students thought that the oral communication inclusion in the course was poor. 35% of the students indicated that the BLL course focused more on writing in a good way where as 40.5% regarded attention to writing as fair. 59.4% of the students highlighted that reading was given good attention in the course whereas 40.5% of the students regarded grammar being catered to more. This was further attested by the assessments prepared by the outside agency to check online material proficiency. Most of the quizzes were based on reading comprehension and grammar. On the average reading comprehension was given 35% and grammar 56% weightage. Five quizzes, based on the online materials, were taken during the course and none of them made oral communication as the focus. This authenticated students’ claim that the materials did not align well with the objectives of the OCPS course guidelines.

The results clearly pointed at the fact that the oral communication skills were not the focus of the online course content. The results also pointed at the possibility that a ‘one size fits all’ course was implemented by the outside agency. The needs and the objectives of the course were not kept in mind prior to the implementation of the course. This calls for further deliberations regarding the suitability of materials vis a vis particular courses. Krasnova and Sidorenko (2013) also contended that the success of BL depended upon a well-structured and planned syllabus. Kaur (2013) argued that even if the institution realized the efficacy of BL, it failed to understand that this was a complex process that needed thought beyond an individual programme. The usefulness of the BL mode of operation could be completely jeopardized if the suitability of course materials were not aligned well with the overall objectives of the courses.

### ***Technical quality of the BLL course***

The results signified that technical glitches emerged as a standing issue with the BLL mode. Higgins (2014) contended that virtual learning environments were not always user friendly. 38% of the students agreed and 16% strongly agreed to having technical problems while doing online exercises. The interviews also suggested the same and many students pointed at the difficulty they had in their effort to access online language materials. Some of the students’ work taken through assessments and quizzes also revealed that the concepts were not internalized adequately as they were unable to access the materials on time.

Some of the issues cited were connectivity problems, slow internet and hanging of the website. Smyth, Oughton, Cooney, and Casey (2012) also cited a study in which first year post graduate nursing students reported poor internet connection as a challenging factor which disallowed them to use the BL system properly. Technical issues, therefore, emerged a challenge which must be taken seriously to ensure the smooth functioning of the courses. Such issues, if persisted, could lower down the interest of students in online work together with the loss of efficacy of the BL programme.

### ***Regularity in attending to the BLL mode***

Amongst the factors that lowered down the effectiveness of the BLL programme was the regularity of students in attempting the online exercises. Li (2015) contended that learner's self-regulation remained a major challenge in the BL context. 24.3% of the students agreed that they were not regular in attempting time-bound online exercises. However, 29.7% disagreed with the notion. One of the major factors outlined by students for remaining irregular was the pressure of the full course load. 27% of the students agreed and 21.6% of the students strongly agreed that the full time course load became an inhibiting factor in making them give quality time to online exercises. In the interviews one of the students remarked, "it was very difficult to manage online work with full term course load". (Personal communication, November 20, 2015). However, it could be argued that effective time management might be the cause of not giving enough time to online exercises. Awan, Azher, Anwar and Naz (2010) also contended that university students needed to break out of the mold of relative passivity and nervousness with second language (L2) acquisition. BL as a flexible mode involved self-discipline and self-monitoring. Generally students were more used to attending f2f classes, and therefore, could not have disciplined themselves well with the more flexible BL mode. Technical problems with the website might have also played a role in transcending the allotted time boundaries for work completion.

### ***Suggestions for the improvement of the course***

The students came up with several suggestions for the improvement and effective and successful functioning of the BLL mode. A firm suggestion which came from the students was that for the successful application of BLL programmes it was important to align it well with the overall objectives of the course. Shibley, Amaral, Shank, and Shibley (2011) too stressed that appropriate alignment and purposeful integration of ICT and teaching strategies in a blended course could enhance both F2F and online student learning because it offered students "more structured learning opportunities outside of class than they have had previously [and this] increased time-on-task seems to improve learning" (p. 84). Yang (2001) too contended that online mode was not an add-on to f2f learning. True effectiveness could only be reached once the two modes were synergized for meaningful language learning.

The students also opined that interesting online materials were necessary for sustained attention in the course. They further elaborated that the online materials should not be repetitive, lengthy, time consuming and too easy as these factors gave rise to boredom and monotony. They further suggested that the materials must pose a kind of language challenge for them to get an intense experience of language learning. As outlined in the results about 23.5% of the students agreed and strongly agreed to the fact that the materials were uninteresting and not challenging. They also recommended a booklet for the better internalization of operational procedures.

The suggestions indicated that the students were genuinely interested in the BLL programme and with appropriate amendments and alterations this could become a strong component of language teaching and learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study revealed that the BLL mode exercised a sound potential at the undergraduate level and the students displayed a positive inclination towards the implementation of the said mode in education. Szeto (2014) shares a similar view and contends that blended synchronous approaches are gaining currency in changing the higher education landscape. Watson (2008) informs that, "the blended learning model is likely to emerge as the predominant model of the future" (p.3). The need, therefore, is to carefully incorporate BLL in higher education by overcoming organizational challenges, building training capacity of students and others in using the BL mode and most of all making all stakeholders aware of its benefits. Moreover, it is highly desirable to run BLL courses in alignment with the overall objectives of the courses. The online and f2f components must complement each other. Li (2015) opines that learning contents, learner factors, learning objectives should be given consideration in preparation of BL courses. Further, it is imperative that the online materials are developed keeping in mind the learner language needs. 'One size fits all' materials are not suitable in situations where learners have diverse language needs. Also, it is worthwhile for the language teaching faculty to extend their roles beyond teaching and become material developers. Tomlinson (1998) contends that teachers are best suited to be material developers because they are cognizant of the language needs of their students and therefore must get grounding in materials development. It is worthwhile to solicit technical help from outside agencies but the mandate to tailor material to specific learner q

Krasnova and Sidorenko (2013) are of the view that BL has a tremendous potential in teaching a foreign language as it offers an opportunity to integrate innovative and technological advances of online learning with interaction and participation of best traditional practices. BLL approach is therefore a successful mode of

operation as it enhances emancipatory and self-directed learning on one hand and on the other enables learners to critically analyze concepts in their own allotted time. However, efforts should be geared towards making it more relevant and appropriate to student context so that maximum benefit can be derived from it.

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