Blended Learning: The Future of CELE Curricula?

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Abstract

Given the current global pandemic, many learning institutes (Asia University included) have turned to online platforms and methods in order to maintain instruction. Many teachers have had to adapt swiftly to alter class materials, teaching styles and methodology. This situation has, however, had the added effect of highlighting the importance of computer assisted language learning (CALL) and its efficacy in meeting students' needs. Naturally, under the new statusquo, more and more institutions will be looking towards blended learning as a way of bridging the gap between traditional in-classroom instruction and online instruction, thus future-proofing language courses if a similar situation should arise. By looking at the Centre for English Language Education (CELE) department's current curricula, textbook selections, materials and course goals, this article will attempt to assess the feasibility, benefits and drawbacks in implementing a standardised blended learning structure. It will also draw on well-established research and case studies already conducted on blended learning methodology.

<center>**What is Blended Learning?**</center>

Blended learning, as defined by Stein (2014), can be imagined as "a spectrum of technology enhancement, with traditional onsite on the left and fully online on the right, a blended course could fall anywhere in between the two" (p. 12). He continues by clarifying that "an online course becomes blended as soon as it introduces onsite, face-to-face meetings. Typically, an onsite course becomes blended when online activities are designed to *replace* onsite sessions." (p. 12). Therefore, blended learning can be formed from any ratio of online to face-to-face methods, so long as both aspects have intrinsic instructional value. For example, a course in which instruction is face-to-face, but the instructor uses email to send reminders to students, would not constitute blended learning.

Singh (2003) argues that blended learning instruction should in actuality encompass a much broader collection of learning strategies, all of which should be considered when designing a successful blended learning programme. He highlights blending self-paced learning with collaborative learning; blending structured learning with unstructured learning; blending custom content with off-the-shelf content; and blending learning with practice and performance. However, whilst some of these strategies may be referenced in this article, within the context of the Centre for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University, much of Singh's definition is more relevant to individual teaching style than to the curricula. Perhaps the most applicable definition to the CELE context is given by Leakey and Ranchoux (2006), who define blended learning as:

> the adaptation in a local context of previous CALL and non-CALL pedagogies into an integrated program of language teaching and learning drawing on different mixes of media and delivery to produce an optimum mix that addresses the unique needs and demands of that context. (p. 358)

This definition emphasises the importance of effectively combining learning methods in order to tailor instruction to its context (the students, the teachers and the institution) whilst ensuring instruction is as fruitful and engaging as possible.

<center>**Models and Elements of a Blended Learning Programme**</center>

Staker and Horn (2016) identify and discuss four models for designing a blended learning course: (a) *rotation model*; (b) *flex model*; (c) *self-blend model*; and (d) *enriched-virtual model*. The rotation model refers to courses in which students rotate between different learning modes, at least one of which is online. This could be achieved as one of the following: 'station rotation', whereby students stay in one classroom but rotate activities; 'lab

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rotation', in which students move between different locations (one of which may be a computer lab); and 'flipped classroom', in which content is delivered and instructed through online media and face-to-face lessons are used for practice and projects. A flex model describes a course in which "content and instruction are delivered primarily by the Internet, students move on an individually customized, fluid schedule among learning modalities, and […] the teacher […] is on-site [and] provide[s] face-to-face support on a flexible and adaptive as-needed basis" (p. 12). A self-blend model describes a course which is taught entirely online but is used to supplement a traditional course, perhaps acting as further study or practice for motivated or struggling students. Finally, the enriched-virtual model describes "a whole school experience in which within each course, students divide their time between attending a […] campus and learning remotely" (p. 12).

As stated by Stein and Graham (2014), a successful blended course "requires an online learning environment to organize and supplement the onsite sessions" (p. 22). This can be achieved through a department website or a ready-made Learning Management System (LMS) such as Moodle or Manaba, the latter of which is currently being used for online instruction at Asia University. Designed to act as a course or institutional hub, the LMS provides a space in which teachers are able to post important course information and assignments as well as links to online resources used in the course. In terms of activities, blended learning techniques are divided be Stein and Graham (2014) into three types: synchronous physical (which includes instructor-led classrooms and lectures); synchronous online (which includes online meetings, web seminars and virtual classrooms); and self-paced, asynchronous online (which includes computer-based training modules and tests, online learning communities and discussion forums).

Benefits of Blended Learning

Extensive research (Bañados, 2006; Kobayashi, 2001; Sahin-Kizil, 2014 and Owen, 2010) has shown that adopting blended learning can be highly beneficial. Firstly, it allows students exposure and interaction with computers and new platforms, broadening the amount and diversity of available resources and therefore appealing to different learning styles. It also affords students methods of communicating in English such as texting, emailing, blogging, social media and video calling, which would otherwise likely be absent in classroom instruction. Giving students an opportunity to communicate in English in ways which would otherwise predominantly be reserved for L1 helps students generate relevance and importance in their language acquisition. Secondly, graduating students face a highly

competitive job market with many positions requiring both English ability and ICT skills. Thus, the technological proficiency indirectly gained through online instruction is a highly beneficial by-product and could exponentially boost students' career prospects. Thirdly, from a department's point of view, blended learning can help standardise EFL courses. Online assignments, tests, and materials could be developed and reused year after year by utilising a specified LMS platform, perhaps periodically edited and updated as required. Finally, as in-class lesson content transitions into online content, so too is responsibility shifted from teacher to student. With online instruction, students are required to become more autonomous and less reliant on teachers to lead every activity.

Research into Blended Learning in an EFL Context

Liang and Bonk (2009) successfully integrated three dimensions of interaction (textual, social, and technological) when creating a blended learning EFL program based on a five-step process. The five steps were: 1) setting course objectives; 2) selecting media and tools; 3) formulating techniques and strategies; 4) organising activities and technologies; and 5) evaluating student learning. By using this five-step process, they were able to build a course which utilised online and face-to-face lessons using appropriate platforms and activities to meet the needs of their students.

Sahin-Kizil (2014) used Moodle as his primary course management system which helped build a blended learning environment through its functions of Lesson, Quiz, Glossary, Forum, Assignment, and Gradebook. "Main topic presentations were primarily realised during the in-class teaching; however, extension points were presented on the Moodle site" (p. 179). Thus, Sahin-Kizil loosely utilised the self-blend model. YouTube videos were also used as an online source for authentic audio and visual, as well as grammar notes prepared on PowerPoint. When surveyed, he found that the majority of students were overall more engaged by a blended course design than traditional face-to-face teaching.

Kobayashi and Little (2011) provide potentially the most applicable research to the CELE context as they conducted a study with first- and second-year university students in Japan. The programme used a widely available textbook series which contained online components and looked at students' perceived improvement in English ability and ICT literacy before and after the course. Unfortunately, their results showed an inability in some students to properly navigate the interface of the online component, as well as a lack of typing skills, which may have affected learner attitudes. However, overall the results indicated that the blended learning was a success, noting in particular that students "felt they

enhanced their listening skills and developed a deeper understanding of the textbook contents through the use of the online component" (p. 114).

An Overview of Current CELE Curricula and Student Needs

CELE curricula are primarily comprised of courses which focus on general English and involve all four skills but with particular emphasis on communication skills and critical thinking. For most students at Asia University, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) test is also a major component which currently serves as both the placement test for English classes at the beginning of the year, and, for some majors, a gateway test to graduation. Students are therefore expected not only to improve their general English skills, but also expand their business English vocabulary, improve their reading speed, and advance their test-taking skills in order to achieve an acceptable TOEIC score. Besides the various Communication courses, most courses taught at CELE are compulsory subjects and either meet four or five times a week for 50 minutes (Freshman English) or once a week for 105 minutes.

It is also worth noting that, based on the high importance Asia University places on students studying abroad, particularly through its Asia University America Program (AUAP), some courses have a direct impact on preparing students to study abroad (Study Abroad Communication, Global Topics, Freshman English for students majoring in International Relations and Multicultural Communication, and Sophomore English for students majoring in International Relations). Students in other courses, such as Freshman English for other majors, while also given the opportunity to study abroad, are less likely to join a study abroad programme. Currently, the main textbook series used in CELE classes are *Four Corners* and *TOEIC Skills* in Freshman English and *Pathways* in Freshman and Sophomore English for IR and MC students. All three textbooks contain an online workbook and various online resources, offering varying degrees of quality.

Implementing Blended Learning with CELE Curricula

When considering the feasibility of implementing blended learning at CELE, we should first consider the different models as outlined above and how relevant they would be within our context. Of the four models, the flex and enrich-virtual model appear to be the least feasible. Since the enrich-visual model relies on the cooperation and implementation of the whole institution, it would be somewhat challenging and unrealistic to set up at Asia University as the administration would not be amenable to a university-wide change

instigated by CELE. The flex model could potentially be the most effective, as courses are tailored to the individual requirements of the student and students are able to study at their own pace. However, as teachers are not provided with any information about the students before the beginning of the semester – except their TOEIC scores – teachers would have to spend time and effort assessing the abilities, learning styles and needs of students before assigning individual work schedules. For teachers who have up to a hundred students per semester, this would prove exceptionally demanding. Also, since courses and online class schedules are individually customized to the student, this method would require more online materials to be sourced or produced. However, once set up, a flex model course could potentially require less effort in the long run, in terms of reusing materials and less weekly preparation. Also, since the flex model relies so much on online instruction, its incorporation into CELE's compulsory courses such as Freshman English would potentially yield issues regarding student motivation and participation.

This leaves the rotation and self-blend models as more viable options for implementing blended learning at CELE. Self-blended learning also relies on student autonomy and individual motivation but, unlike the flex model, the online component of a self-blended course compliments the face-to-face lessons and acts as additional practice instead of being the majority of instruction. Therefore, if less motivated students decide not to complete it, the effect of omitting the online component would be less detrimental than with the flex model. Self-blended learning could also utilise the off-the-shelf learning management systems that are incorporated into many modern EFL textbooks, such as the online workbooks available in *Four Corners* and *Pathways.* This would therefore be an easy and time-efficient way of transitioning into blended learning, perhaps serving as a way to test the waters. The LMS included with *Four Corners* can also, if setup properly, allow teachers to view students' work and check for participation and accuracy. The biggest drawback to these platforms, though, is their inability to facilitate error correction and on-the-spot feedback, which can only be given in synchronous instruction. However, as proven by Bañados (2006), both error correction and on-the-spot feedback are better dealt with in face-to-face lessons. Whilst self-blended learning appears to be the easier and more time-efficient model to implement, a rotation model could be better suited to CELE curricula. A rotation model allows a high level of flexibility in speed and activity content. It is also good for students with motivation and/or short attention spans as, by rotating and switching between activities and modes of instruction, it can help keep students engaged as well as appeal to different learning styles.

It is also important to consider an effective ratio of online to face-to-face instruction. For Freshman English, the short but frequent lesson format lends itself well to blended learning, as it provides some flexibility with when online components are set and how much of the course is online. For example, in a four day a week Freshman English course, students could attend face-to-face lessons in the first and last lesson, with the two middle lessons as online. Or, if a flipped classroom method is applied, students could study the content (grammar, vocabulary, reading, or listening) online in the first two lessons, and the two face-to-face lessons at the end of the week could focus on language production and fluency activities. However, for the once-a-week courses, splitting the course into online and classroom instruction could reduce student-student interaction as, if the teaching methods were alternated week by week, over one semester, students would only meet face-to-face six or seven times in total, two weeks apart.

Challenges and Limitations to Implementing Blended Learning

When compared to traditional teaching, Bonk and Graham (2006) compiled three main weaknesses to online instruction, particularly in relation to asynchronous instruction. These were a lack of spontaneity, a lack of human connection, and a tendency towards procrastination in students. Hubbard (2008) also suggests reasons why teachers and institutions are slow to integrate technology and are therefore not meeting the contemporary need and desire by students for CALL courses. These include inertia, ignorance, insufficient time, insufficient infrastructure, and an overall lack of experienced and knowledgeable educators in the field of CALL. While a transition to blended learning could be made incrementally, these reasons are highly applicable as potential challenges. In particular, successfully integrating a blended learning system which adequately, if not surpassingly, replaces face-to-face lessons requires commitment from teachers in both time and effort. Online platforms and lesson resources would need to be researched, selected, prepared, and implemented. Teachers would need to be provided with sufficient training and guidance which would require instructors with extensive previous experience to administer. Students would also be required to have access to the appropriate technology. However, this may already be mitigated given that students are able to borrow laptop computers and use desktop computers on the Asia University campus. As well as sufficient access to technology, it would be necessary for students to be given guidance in using online platforms as well as helping students with their typing skills, as evidenced by the findings of Kobayashi and Little (2011).

Conclusion

Much of the legwork required in integrating a blended learning system into CELE curricula has potentially been done, due to the global pandemic and subsequent need for online teaching. There is already an LMS (Manaba) established and used university-wide, and teachers have already adapted lessons and materials to online instruction. However, more work would be required by both the Curriculum Development Committee and the Visiting Faculty Members in order to successfully blend online with face-to-face teaching in a standardised way, perhaps following Liang and Bonk's five-step process. After careful consideration of current models of blended learning, two stand out as possible choices for successful integration into the CELE curricula with minimal time and effort. A rotation model would allow students to switch between face-to-face, online synchronous and online asynchronous learning which would better cater towards differing learning styles. This would be particularly effective with classes which meet regularly such as Freshman English. The self-blend model would perhaps work better for courses which meet once a week, so as not to detract from the student-student interaction necessary for students to become comfortable and inherent in face-to-face lessons. As a department, CELE would be remiss if it did not consider ways in which blended learning could be employed in the future. The benefits it can provide to both students and teachers far outweigh the challenges and effort required to implement it. Particularly for students who choose to study abroad for a semester, without experience of learning with computers and technology at Asia University, they may be ill-equipped with insufficient ICT skills to succeed in a new, English-speaking environment.

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