

BLENDING LEARNING IN LSP ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES: CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

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Abstract

Extensive use of technologies has brought many changes into different aspects of life, including teaching and learning. Teaching and learning languages are not exceptions and they have witnessed tremendous changes in the past 25 years. These changes put the need to learn languages to improve communication into spotlight. Language for Specific Purposes (LSP)—aka ESP: English for Specific Purposes—programmes strive to prepare university graduates who are linguistically and communicatively proficient and adequately accurate in their areas of expertise. This paper is an attempt to address some of these challenges in university LSP programs and offer possible solutions.

Keywords: Blended Learning, ESP, LSP, CALL, MALL, hybrid learning, mixed mode learning, online and face-to-face modalities

Introduction

Due to the evolving nature of BL (blended learning), and considering the different context in which BL takes place, there are still several variations in defining BL. Since blending can happen through applying some mixed regime of online and face-to-face, through diversifying the different possible delivery methods, and through applying a variety of instructional methods, definitions of BL usually tend to pay more attention to one of them. However, in this paper, BL is used to mean the learning that is the product of combined doses of face-to-face and online instruction (Graham, 2013).

Creativity and innovation are the two most important characteristics of the 21st century education. They also play a major role in blended learning. Depending on the context and purpose of learning, there are different models of BL. The increase of BL learning in K-12 contexts (Picciano, Seaman, Shea, & Swan, 2011) has mostly been an “alternative to purely online models”, requiring physical supervision of students during the school day (Wicks, 2010). This model, according to Watson (2008), includes eight dimensions, as shown in Figure 1:

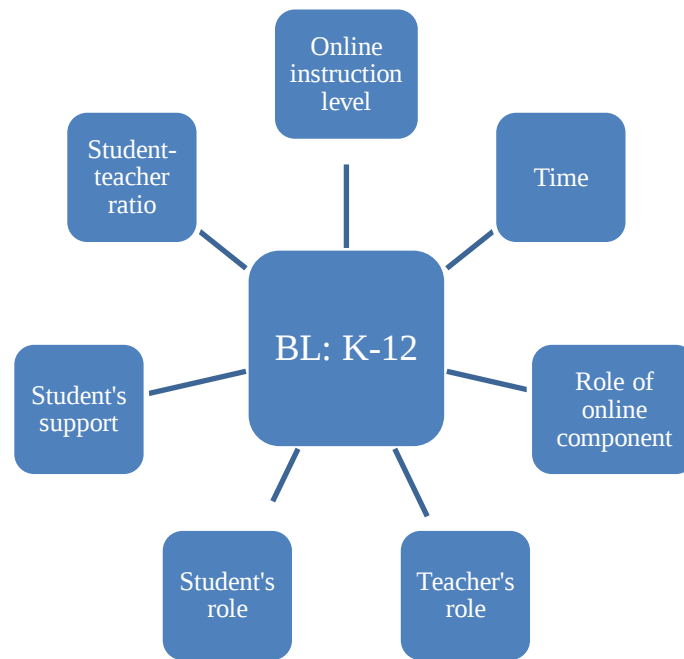


Figure 1. Watson's K-12 BL Model (Watson, 2008).

However, perhaps one dimension is missing from Watson's model, and that is "Teacher's Support". Therefore, I suggest a modified model for K-12 blended learning, as seen in Figure 2 below. The teacher's support can be extended through institutional support, professional development/learning or through some mentoring programmes. It is predominantly the case that the university teaching staff is on the top of their disciplines; however, there is always the need for training and retraining since technology is always evolving.

The explosion of information and the need to disseminate, analyse and use information have made the need of corporations to train/retrain the staff even more paramount. Here again, BL has come to prove very useful. However, the model followed in BL in corporations has its own characteristics, which represent a combination of classroom instruction, independent online learning, and a teacher's guided online learning in both formal and informal learning modes, both synchronously and asynchronously.

In higher education, BL has been gaining increasing popularity. Many researchers now strongly believe that BL will be the major course delivery method in the future of higher education (Norberg, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2011; Lim & Wang, 2017). In higher education, technology predominantly helps to reinforce the previously learned items, or it may be used to fill the gap if learning is disrupted (Diaz & Diniz, 2012). Moreover, there is a different realization of the kind of knowledge HE students need to acquire, the organization of the teaching process, and the learning materials to be created (Torrao & Tiirmaa-Oras, 2007).

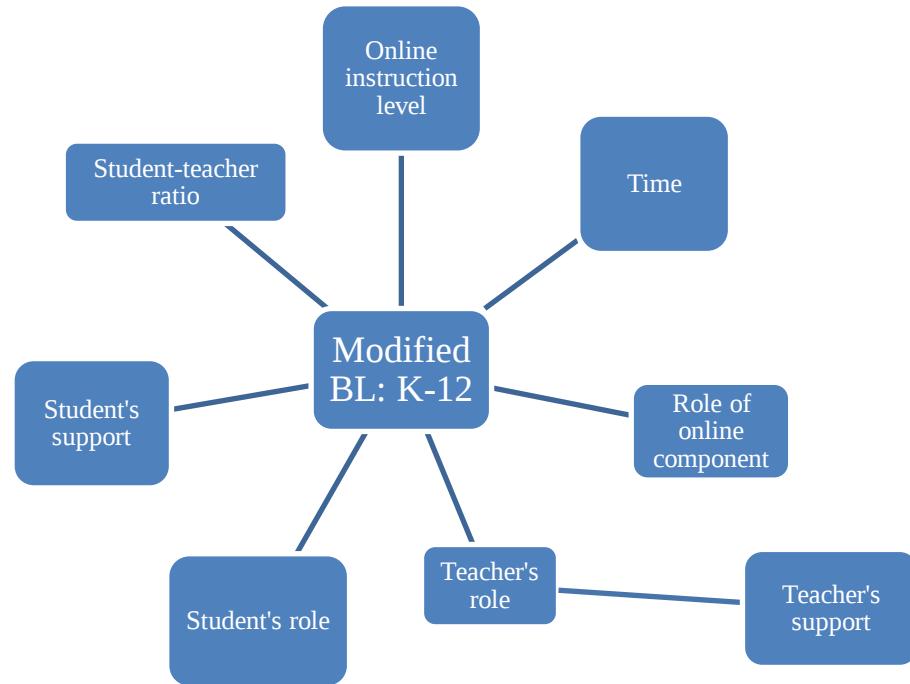


Figure 2. Modified BL K-12 Model.

Blended Learning: Strategic Components

Devising and developing optimised and coherent blended learning programmes in higher education institutions require the identification and integration of multiple strategic components: vision; curriculum; policy and institutional infrastructure; technological infrastructure and resources; support mechanisms; and partnerships.

Vision

Vision outlines the organisational objectives that guide and formulate the process of decision making and serves as the organisational road map. In other words, the mission of a higher education institution clarifies where on the higher education map it currently stands and where it is heading to. Long and detailed, visions historically used to be “descriptions of the institution’s founding, curricular history, unique culture and current services” (Hinton, 2012). However, these days, vision statements of higher education institutions mostly pronounce the institutional aspirations that reflect the institutional environment present in the given institution. To sum up, the vision of a higher institution expresses what it currently is and what it intends to become.

Curriculum

The term “curriculum” has been defined differently through the modern history of education. Instances of curriculum definitions include:

- the collection of different learning outcomes in a structured manner (Johnson, 1967);

- a method of communicating the critical “principles and features” of an educational concept open to scrutiny and capable of being “translated into practice” (Stenhouse, 1975);
- a formulated rationale-based version of an educational proposal to be implemented (Jenkins & Shipman, 1976);
- an organised set of goals that outlines the plan of formal education and training intentions (Pratt, 1980);
- a plan and a blueprint of learning experiences planned for the students (Hass, 1987);
- the syllabus to which is added the “planning to a consideration of the content or the body of knowledge that they wish to transmit” (Smith, 1996, 2000); and
- comprehensive planned and guided learning experiences individually or otherwise in and out of school (Kelly, 2004).

According to UNESCO, designing curriculum is an attempt towards packaging a set of competencies that learners are supposed to acquire via organised learning experiences that occur formally and informally (UNESCO, 2016). This view on curriculum gives considerable room to formative assessment, and blended learning lends itself well to formative assessment as it is possible to render individualised responses to learners.

Policy and Institutional Infrastructure

Technological and societal changes have dramatically affected different aspects of life, including education, and particularly higher education. Organisational change and development are strongly supported by proper organisational structures so that they can render the change they envision (De Freitas & Oliver, 2006; Jalkanen, Pitkänen-Huhta, & Taalas, 2012). Higher education should develop plans with specific guidelines to cater to the smooth delivery of blended learning programmes in a manner which engages both students and faculty members. Considering that “creativity” and “innovation” are the two major pillars of the *21st century education*, it would be difficult to imagine that they can be materialised without “autonomy” and “freedom”, which cannot flourish and further enhance education unless there are well-defined policies.

Technological Infrastructure and Resources

Technology is said to be the facilitating means to bring change, though it does not bring change per se (Allan, Law, & Wong, 2003). However, how deeply a higher education institution is ready in terms of technology is an important factor to consider when blended learning is in perspective (Niemic & Otte, 2010). A higher education institution which intends to set up and run a blended learning programme needs to make sure it has the right physical and virtual infrastructure. It becomes quite important to foster an adequate delivery of the content and building capacity for foreseeable future developments.

Support Mechanisms

Students as well as teachers often use the technology they have for communication and entertainment purposes rather than “gather and constructing knowledge” (Wang, Hsu, Campbell, Coster, & Longhurst, 2014). This is an indication that they might not have had a first-hand experience of using technology for learning purposes. Both teachers and students need training and support to gradually feel comfortable with educational technology. Higher education institutions should facilitate learning support centres to advise students and teachers on the use and best practices of using technology. This would, in turn, help develop teachers and students into independent life-long-learners, the quality that 21st century education actively promotes.

Partnerships

Different academic departments within a higher education organization often forge partnerships towards pre-defined objectives. Higher education organizations also often sign memoranda of understanding (MoUs) towards mutually interesting projects. In either of these cases, there is always the element of a “common goal” (Shubber, 2008) while partners tap into each other’s resources. This also prevents taking duplicate actions or developing unnecessary programmes.

Lim and Wang formulated the strategic components of BL in higher education as seen in Figure 3 below.

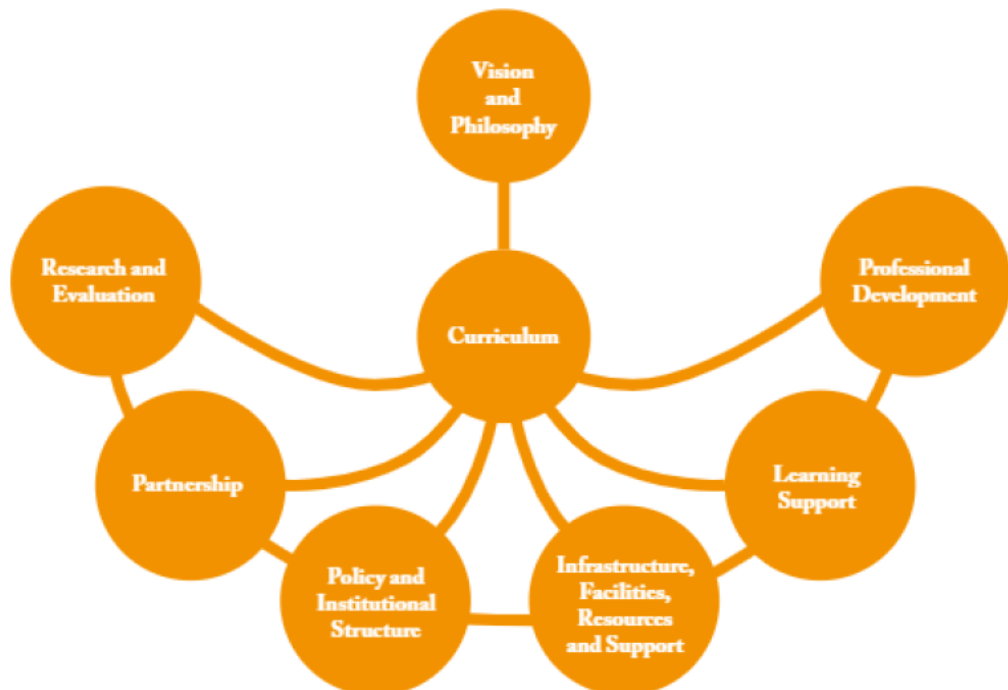


Figure 3. A holistic framework for building the blended learning capacity of higher education institutions (Lim & Wang, 2017).

Blended Learning Models in Higher Education

Today, most BL activities in higher education follow one of the following models:

1. *Blended face-to-face class*: Learners have access to the technology in face-to-face classroom and teaching alternates between the face-to-face and the online modes.
2. *Blended online class*: Learners mostly use the online component; however, some class time or lab time is needed for the further reinforcement of the items to be learned.
3. *The flipped classroom*: Students watch short online lecture videos and cover some study materials. They then come to class to work on collaborative projects or to do exercises.
4. *The self-blend model*: The online component is not actually part of the educational program. However, students choose to enrol in totally online programmes that would supplement the face-to-face courses
5. *The blended MOOC*: Learners choose to use a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and choose to have some face-to-face meetings to supplement the learning process.
6. *Flexible online model*: Learners choose to study courses that were designed with dynamic, varying doses of online and face-to-face learning events.

Language for Specific Purposes (LSP)

Language programmes in higher education strive to help students acquire enough language knowledge skills so that they are able to constructively function in professional and social contexts using the target language. Using relevant methodologies, Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) courses are designed to deliver content in the target language based on an identified set of specialized needs. In other words, contrasted with Language for General Purposes (LGP), LSP combines linguistics and content area knowledge specific to a particular context based on the learners' needs. As can be seen from Figure 4 below, the process of developing an LSP course involves: (1) needs analysis; (2) determining goals and objectives; (3) assessment; (4) materials selection and development; (5) teaching; and (6) program evaluation.

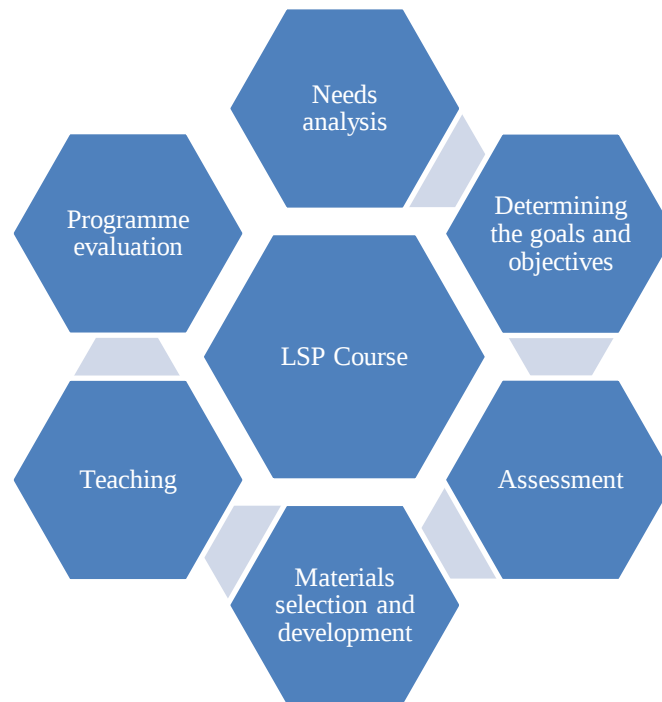


Figure 4. Steps of Developing an LSP Course.

The labour market in the 21st century has witnessed massive transformations posing new and different demands on university graduates and university lecturers. This means that the knowledge and academic skills learners acquire during their studies should be “applicable and transferable from the higher education context to their future professional careers” (Knezović, 2016). Considering the teaching context of LSP, the teachers’ objective is not merely teaching the language per se; it is also to prepare students to use that language as a medium to develop the skills and competencies relevant to the discipline being studied. These include competencies and multiple literacies such as media and information literacy, critical thinking, creativity, cultural awareness, discipline-related ethics, problem-solving and analytical skills, effective written and oral communication skills, and collaborative and social skills, all necessary and instrumental in making university graduates more competitive in everyday professional environments. Yet, as a result of limiting factors such as time, teacher-student ratio, and predominantly topic-based syllabi, LSP courses focus largely on teaching the subject matter and specialist vocabulary instead of “sufficient development of skills and competences required by students’ prospective employers .” (Knezović, 2016)

To make up and circumvent the above-mentioned limiting factors, an increasing number of teachers and students have begun considering and adopting BL in LSP teaching and learning.

Challenges

Teaching languages still has some unanswered questions. For example, the debate still continues as to how languages are learned, what is the role of the first language (L1) in learning a second and/or a foreign language, whether

gender plays any role in learning a new language, etc. When technology, a new parameter, is also added, it is difficult to imagine that it should not bring new challenges to the game.

Technology Challenges

In order to deliver content in the online segment of a BL program, the required software is needed; however, teachers are not predominantly software developers and the majority of software developers are not language teachers. Moreover, students might not necessarily be familiar with all the features of given software, and they might need training. To sum up, troubled by technology, participants may be likely to abandon the program, thereby leading the program to failure.

Organizational challenges

The success or failure of any innovative approach in academia (like any other organization) depends on how deeply the organization supports and advocates the innovation in question. Different studies show that organizational support plays an important role in the success of different academic programmes. (Ersoy, 2014; Eisenberge, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Randall, Cropanzano, Bormann, & Birjulin, 1999; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Quite often, academic policy and decision makers are not from a language teaching background and that hinders them from giving language teaching innovations their due support. For example, they might think that BL in teaching languages might not be as effective as a face-to-face teaching mode. There are also conceptual challenges, as the integration of technology has transformed some of the traditional definitions in education. For instance, a “classroom” is not necessarily a “brick-and-mortar” entity; it can be virtual, too. The role of a “teacher” is not to transfer knowledge to students unidirectionally; s/he is more of a “facilitator”, a director of studies. Moreover, students’ attitudes and perceptions are also affected when an innovative component is added to course. It can even affect the students’ academic identities.

Assessment Challenges

In all academic programs, language teaching programs include students’ progress and a course of activities need to be assessed, enabling them to go up the academic ladder. However, in the event of adopting a BL regime, how would the learner be assessed? Based on the face-to-face component? Based on the length of time they spend logged in the system? Based on performance in a formal exam? Would that exam be face-to-face, online or combined?

LSP-specific challenges

Due to the nature of LSP teaching, blended lessons could have particular intricacies. For example, learning languages on one’s own requires a great amount of intrinsic motivation. Moreover, due to the discipline-oriented nature of LSP courses, different language items (technical terms, abbreviations, acronyms, etc.) are interpreted differently. LSP courses are rather formally structured. Therefore, in case that social media is used to blend an LSP course,

the informal atmosphere of social media might find itself in some conflict with the formal structure of the course. Moreover, language teachers could get along with the integration of technology in teaching language for general purposes (LGP), but they will find the adoption and creation of LSP material more challenging.

Benefits

Although the adoption of BL in an LSP programme poses some challenges, it is beneficial in other respects. First and foremost, it increases motivation on the side of the learners. This becomes especially true when learners feel independent through carrying on a variety of different tasks. It also enhances the learners' sense of achievement.

One of the most important aspects of learning languages is the provision of authentic materials. Blended learning gives the opportunity to a language learner to have access to authentic language items and use them several times in order to master the target skill. The rather self-paced and self-controlled use of the authentic language item helps learners experience language in the context it is intended to. It also protects learners against developing fossilised errors.

Perhaps one of the key factors making LSP courses different from other courses is the “interactive” nature of language learning. Learning under formal circumstances, which is characteristic of learning in most disciplines, is rather linear. In math, for example, one needs to learn the basic four operations before venturing upon equations. Learning languages, on the other hand, is rather organic. Learners pick bits of the language from different interactions, put them together, make generalizations, deductions, revisions, and come up with their “own formula” to use the language item in question. The access to different authentic materials on the web, in fact, breaks the “linear flow of instruction” (Lee, 2000).

The interactive nature of learning in LSP might pose some challenges to students who are shy or might have reservations to produce language. The individualised nature of the online component of the blended LSP course and the collaborative nature of it will give these inhibited students the opportunity to blend in smoothly. Fast learners, on the other hand, do not prevent their colleagues from moving at their individualised paces.

One of the main features of learning language in the 21st century is gaining global cultural literacy. Different language contents created and shared on the web are culturally-loaded. Having the opportunity to observe and experience these language items can give learners the cultural awareness that would serve as the key to unlock many other language items they will come across in the future.

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