

Blended Language Learning

There are advantages in both face-to-face and on-line learning environments. This paper advocates an approach to the design of English language learning which blends the two methodologies. The authors recommend methods which concentrate on the nature of teacher guidance, the way learning experiences are designed and the use of problem-based learning to enhance learner involvement.



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Glossary of Acronyms

ICT Information and communication technologies
PBL Problem-based learning

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As educators, we have always taught in a range of environments, using a range of tools and media.

We work with our students in classrooms, laboratories, workshops and in the field. Each of these places has its own procedures, practices, strengths and weaknesses. Information and communications technologies (ICT) have provided us with an additional place to teach and learn - the e-learning environment. E-learning is but another extension of what we have always done as teachers and it can provide us with very valuable tools and opportunities for teaching and learning to occur.

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However, when novices move into unfamiliar learning contexts, it takes time for them to discover new operating procedures and adopt appropriate modes of behaviour for a **new learning environment** (Salmon, 2001). Ultimately, the level of development of on-line communication skills and strategies influences the ability of both educators and students to achieve learning outcomes effectively.

In order to understand fully the potential of ICT in English language learning, we need to:

- Be aware of factors that can hinder and obstruct successful practice on-line,
- Recognise that **the nature of teacher guidance on-line is critical** to the success of activities,
- Make sure that the tasks and / or activities are well planned, interesting and assessed appropriately,
- Provide on-line learners with exposure to a wide range of experiences, opportunities for reflection, peer-teaching and student-to-student interaction.

A blended approach allows us to focus all modes of communication onto the completion of a learning task.

Successful English language learning on-line

In order to get the most out of ICT, we need to do more than just provide additional opportunities for 'language practice'. This is particularly true in a context where communication can be defined as a

'... symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people create shared meanings' (Lustig & Koester, p. 25).

All too often, on-line discussions are framed around the bare prompt of 'discuss this topic'. Alternatively, we need to provide learners with exposure to a wide range of opportunities for interaction and reflection. For this to occur there needs to be a clear purpose for the interactions that are envisaged. Communication is a two-way process between people that involves feedback, negotiation, and the building and sharing of meanings. If our students are going to develop

effective communication skills suitable for their lives as professionals, we need to mirror this in the educational design of our learning activities. When we design educational activities, we need to remember that meaning and communication protocols can, and do, change with context. One method that can provide the scaffolding and a rich range of opportunities for developing language and communication skills in context is Problem-Based Learning (PBL).

Effective on-line facilitation for language learning

One of the essential steps to effective language learning has been to **minimize 'teacher talk'** in class. The purpose here is to encourage learners to use the target language at maximal levels and it applies equally well to on-line learning. To do this, the on-line teacher needs to take on the role of facilitator or coach.

As teachers, we are used to guiding students through activities in the classroom by giving explanations and providing feedback to students throughout the activities they do. However, when learners move on-line, there is a tendency in some quarters for effective teacher guidance to disappear. However, this need not be the case. In the face-to-face classroom we have all, both teachers and students, over many years, learnt the frameworks, the processes we work through to achieve effective teaching and learning. When we move on-line, **we need to provide appropriate scaffolding** to help the participants succeed. We need to clearly spell out the objectives of the activity and make the process for achieving these objectives explicit.

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Activity design

We maintain, then, that learning needs to be situated in professional practice for optimal results to be achieved. Triggers for discussion, therefore, need to be engaging and tasks need to be designed with clear stages to work through with deliverables required at the end of each stage. For activities to mirror real world work processes, it is necessary for them to span several learning sessions.

When the learner plays an **authentic, active role** in carrying out complex tasks using ICT, we have a compelling situation for fostering language and communications skill development. PBL provides students with opportunities to grapple with realistic, ill-structured problems as if they were problem-solvers in the professional realm. Thus, by designing instruction around the investigation of real-world problems, students are required to:

- Analyse problems,
- Brainstorm ideas,
- Identify learning issues,
- Collaborate as a member of a team,

- Conduct research,
- Peer teach,
- Present findings.

Implementing a blended PBL approach

There are advantages to both face-to-face and on-line learning environments. But as Laurillard (1996) points out, 'A mix of teaching and learning methods will always be the most efficient way to support student learning, because only then is it possible to embrace all the activities of discussion, interaction, adaptation and reflection, which ... are essential for academic learning'.

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This is particularly so with language and communication skills development. A blended approach allows us to **focus all modes of communication onto the completion of a learning task**. One way to arrange a sequence of learning activities in blended PBL is shown in Table 1.

1. Face-to-face	a. Read a case study, b. Analyse and define the problem, c. Generate questions and learning issues, d. Allocate research tasks.
2. On-line	a. Conduct research, b. Share findings, c. Propose and justify solution(s), d. Prepare to write a report of findings.
3. Face-to-face	a. Presentation of solution(s) with written report.

Table 1: A suggested sequence of activities for blended Problem-based Learning.

The final decision on the type of blending used in an English language lesson should be based on the nature and complexity of the activities involved and their desired learning outcomes.

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