

A THIRD WAY: ONLINE LABS INTEGRATED WITH PRINT MATERIALS

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Abstract: This paper discusses the use of ICT in blended learning, where digital materials in language education enhance print-based classroom instruction. By way of illustration it introduces iZone, a print-digital series designed around a lab integrated with its accompanying textbook, making the face-to-face classroom and the online lab an interdependent whole. Advances in computer technology help to overcome the limitations of classroom-only instruction, and the third way referred to here is one that delivers unified content through different media, neither purely online nor just in class. Advantages to this approach include greater learner autonomy and flexibility, with choice of time, place and manner of studying, and also a more participatory learning style. Ultimately, what is envisioned is more effective and more efficient use of time and energy which each individual devotes to study and learning needs. Integrated and interconnected study programmes may help to harness the potential of technological developments in language education.

Keywords: ICT (Information and Communications Technology), blended learning, online labs, F2F (face-to-face), integration.

Abstrak: Makalah ini membahas penggunaan ICT (Teknologi Informasi dan Komunikasi) dalam pembelajaran terpadu, yang di dalamnya materi digital dalam pendidikan bahasa meningkatkan pengajaran di ruang kelas yang berbasis materi cetak. Melalui ilustrasi, makalah ini memperkenalkan iZone, rangkaian digital cetak yang dirancang di laboratorium yang terintegrasi dengan buku teks, menjadikan tatap muka di kelas terpadu dengan laboratorium daring (online). Kemajuan dalam teknologi komputer membantu mengatasi keterbatasan pengajaran yang hanya di kelas saja, dan cara ketiga yang ditawarkan di sini menyuguhkan bahan yang terpadu melalui beraneka media, tidak hanya daring saja atau di kelas saja. Manfaat-manfaat pendekatan ini termasuk otonomi dan fleksibilitas pelajar yang lebih besar terhadap pilihan waktu, tempat dan cara belajar, dan juga gaya belajar yang lebih melibatkan siswa. Pendekatan ini terutama mencoba untuk mencapai penggunaan waktu dan tenaga yang lebih efektif dan efisien yang seorang individu curahkan untuk belajar kebutuhan belajarnya. Program belajar yang terpadu dan saling terhubung bisa membantu memanfaatkan potensi perkembangan teknologi dalam pendidikan bahasa.

Katakunci: ICT (Teknologi Informasi dan Komunikasi), pembelajaran terpadu, laboratorium daring, tatap muka, integrasi.

INTRODUCTION

The ideas presented here discuss ways to apply ICT in language education when and where necessary. Towards this end, it is hard

to escape from the necessity to treat all materials at our disposal equally, both digital and print, as fully integrated components of a single course at the design stage. Like any other mode of language instruction, blended

learning must be high quality, and its appeal rests on technological advances permitting a hitherto unknown level of integration in a package that by virtue of its structure supports and reinforces learning. The paper begins with a discussion of the concept of blended learning, and then outlines how it may work in the language classroom. It situates blended learning in the context of its significance to ELT and demonstrates how it is relevant for matching educational needs, goals and outcomes to the current generation of students. ICT in education needs to satisfy both instructors and the changing expectations of learners, what is termed the Millennial Generation (Dziuban et al., 2004), and that in turn leads to its being both integrated and on demand. Hence practical, real-world applications of blended technology to assist language learning are discussed in detail. As online labs add to (or in other cases, replace) classroom contact hours, the question in the background is the one posed by Moore (Bonk & Graham, 2006): should we still see classroom time as the default position, or ask alternatively whether face-to-face learning support is still required to supplement online learning? For learning, providing it is fulfilling the sociocultural needs of a participatory culture (Lantolf, 2000), need not be tied to a classroom at all.

BLENDED LEARNING

Blended learning in ELT environments is defined variously in the literature, frequently regarded as synonymous with hybrid learning following the lead of Kaleta (2007), in which he argued that hybrid courses shift “a significant amount” of the course learning online. One of the most straightforward definitions is that given by Dudeney and Hockly (2007, p. 183), who described it as “Learning which involves a combination of e-learning and face-to-face learning.” Similarly, Sharma and Barrett (2007, p.7) contended that it “refers to a language course which combines a face-to-face (F2F)

classroom component with an appropriate use of technology.” Within the scope of this paper, the concept is one of a blended print-digital course, in which the textual material (Todd & Palmer, 2009) is integrated with its online learning centre, MyiZoneLab, containing the core course study plan and resources. This is the core online learning resource, where students go to study and access key information. It functions together with in-class directed learning, guided by an instructor who uncovers the subject (Gibbons, 2009) and based on the same spoken grammar, functions and vocabulary, presented in a textbook, and brought to life in the classroom by the teaching professional. Moore (2006) asserted that the instructional design of the course need not be the preserve of the teacher, and, indeed, the instructor’s time could be better spent aiding learners as individuals, bringing out and helping to make sense of the key areas of study. This notion gives a key insight into how new or “third” ways have yet to take hold fully in the ELT profession, namely that by blending the knowledge of materials designers as experts with the instructor’s skill in-class, helping to liberate the teacher’s creativity with an emphasis on the learner’s potential, blended learning can be described as an efficient division of labour (Moore, 2006). This has important implications when considering the multitude of demands placed on teachers in a hi-tech world, for the blended model fully embraces technology in the classroom at the planning and execution stage, unlike conventional text-based language courses that tend to feature an associated website as an add-on to the course. It dispenses with the physical limitations of the CALL Lab and its cost structure, as well as the frustrations experienced by instructors acting as technicians. Online labs can be brought into the class when desirable, or left entirely as a place to go outside class.

MAKING BLENDED PRINT-DIGITAL WORK

A blended course can easily function as an online lab, a course book, a virtual workbook and exercise book, all rolled into one, providing materials to cover the core skills for practice while acting as a comprehensive resource for grammar and vocabulary at each level. The content is delivered both online and in the text, with students gaining kinesthetically from typing written work and answers online as well as writing by hand in the book. The amount of time devoted to studying online is up to the learner, whereas face-to-face instruction will vary with the amount of time available to the instructor. This degree of built-in flexibility reflects changes in the teaching profession as it endeavours to cope with a fluctuating student population, offering teacher-led instruction with the text, teacher-directed study with the text and the online materials, and collaboration with peers using both the online materials and the text in the same classroom, in the same room or across campus, or virtually online outside school. Learner autonomy is implicit in a model where students take more control over their own language learning. According to Bershin (2004), blended learning makes learners feel more engaged, allows them to plan their learning over time, enables them to track their progress at each step along the way, assists them in making changes to the way they study, and helps them maintain their studies better.

GENERATIONAL CHANGES IN EDUCATION

A generational shift in the needs and expectations of Generation Y (Dziuban et al., 2004) implicitly demands that learners embrace technology to enhance study. These Millennials tend to live for today and are tuned in to technology in the moment. Research by Frand (2000), Oblinger (2003), and Dziuban et al. (2004), emphasizes that

blended learning—when integrated and on demand—fits in well with their learning needs and expectations. We can reasonably assume, then, that our younger learners are hungry for technology and have expectations that it will be used in ELT. It is also clear that the ICT revolution, in the words of Rifkin (2009), is distributive, not centralized, and that older ideas will need to give way to new realities. Assumptions built into teacher training in the West (e.g. Thornbury & Watkins, 2007) still largely overlook the possibilities of ICT use in teaching. For just as Generation X (those born between 1965-1980) differentiated itself from the postwar Baby Boomers by a work to live, not live to work ethic, and also by keeping productive by enjoying themselves while working, so it is that the Millennials (Generation Y) distinguish themselves from their predecessors in turn, by such aspects as living for the moment, being tuned in to technology in real time, requiring clear and consistent expectations, needing to experience respect before giving it to others, and questioning everything (Frand, 2000).

Blended learning appears especially well-suited to the learning needs and expectations of Millennials (Dziuban et al., 2004), for whom computers are no longer viewed as distant, other-worldly technology, but as an integral part of life. This is part of a process often referred to as “normalisation.” In the words of Signor (2009, p. 60), “if quality is maintained, blended learning has the potential to not only provide more flexibility for the students but also improved learning growth when compared to traditional face-to-face learning.” The practical example of applying blended learning below suggests that to guarantee quality, it is necessary to integrate the learning experience. ELT courses have been in need of technology to provide a bridge between traditional and contemporary learning. The benefits are more active and interactive student-centered instruction; increased interaction between student-teacher, student-student, student-content,

and student-outside resources; and integrated assessment mechanisms for students and instructor. Print plus digital is an effective means of providing this.

ICT USE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING: HOW THE ONLINE LAB WORKS

A central plank of ICT use in language instruction and learning is to establish a collaborative learning environment which uses technology to supplement and enhance traditional classroom-based communicative language teaching. By integration, it is envisaged that online learning should be relevant to in-class instruction and in-class instruction to online: students prepare online, interact face-to-face in class, and check their progress online. The online component of instruction, learning and evaluation is on demand (Dziuban et al., 2004), in this case accessible by logging on using the password contained inside the back cover of the text.

The unit workflow (MyiZoneLab) described here begins with online Prepare, is followed by in-class study guided by the instructor, is rounded off by online Extras, and is completed by the online Quiz. Preparing online ensures the pre-teaching stage and schema-building, which normally has to be done in class, is completed beforehand and that students come to school already keyed in; class time is managed effectively and is devoted to other key areas of instruction without having to start anew every time. The responsibility for preparing is turned around, with the learner as the agent taking advantage of the instructional design of the materials; hence, it can be more accurately described as pre-learning. This applies not only to vocabulary, first met online and then recycled in the text, but also the unit's theme, its strategies, its video and grammatical structures. Language can, thus, be introduced and integrated seamlessly, as the noticing stage is accomplished by students online studying at their own pace, and students check their understanding in their Gradebook, where individual

performance is monitored and assessed. The online lab is, thus, multifunctional, being both a language course and a study aid, giving the instructor a degree of flexibility in how they teach the class that would otherwise be constrained by having to start from scratch. Fundamentally, the integrated course model frees up time for communicative practice in class. Online preparation and consolidation activities occur in advance by design, and because the same body of material is presented in a different way by the instructor using the text, a greater focus can be given to communicative practice of language that has already been studied. For the students, it is a good check of what they have learnt for themselves online.

Workflow is aided by exploiting media such as the online video, where the power of technology as a tool driving ICT is put to use in language instruction. Bonk (2011) referred to the *The Three Ps*, where *Pages* of content, *Piping* as technological infrastructure and a *Participatory* learning culture, allow online labs to realise their potential. Without the piping of infrastructure, in terms of bandwidth, video has not been fully exploited. iZone's videos employ a common core of actors, who reappear throughout the course and remain in character, allowing students to engage with the characterisation and plots. The online platform is ideally suited to the seamless integration of video with the other study material, designed with contextualization in mind. Students go into class fully prepared and at ease with the topic area and language since the video and associated comprehension exercises have set the scene and provided an embedded context in the minds of the learner as a pre-task activity. Such schema-building tasks focusing on bottom-up processing skills are normally difficult to prepare and execute for instructors, not to mention time-consuming. Taking what is normally one of the most challenging in-class aspects of teaching and making it a positive instructional feature online is a strength of the blended model.

Students have control over the video clips and can open up boxes to view the transcripts whenever they need support. Furthermore, the video clips and interactive activities are combined with the *Zoom in!* language feature, a teaching tool with information on useful phrases and spoken English.

Technology in language learning and teaching has at times struggled with the criticism that it mimics face-to-face learning, and there is a case for arguing that preparing more before class and previewing videos is not unique to the online lab. Yet, with online labs at the heart of the course and printed materials in support, technology can be said to have undergone a transformation, for while blended learning is hardly a recent educational phenomenon (Dziuban et al., 2004), the capabilities that exist today mean that there are new and innovative ways of language study in web-based learning environments, and those environments in turn are constantly evolving online. Features including the use of avatars, instant feedback, learner control over tasks and selection from menus of options, and interactive role plays, taken together, signify a significant shift in online education away from imitating classroom methods and practices. MyiZoneLab adds further enhancements to be used at the discretion of the teacher, extending to course overviews and lesson plans, the online Gradebook, quizzes and tests, options on setting pass levels, receiving alerts on student performance, audio and video with transcripts, file uploading capability, a discussion board feature, and links. Incremental development of instructional models arguably reaches a tipping point, where the online course is home and the printed textbook is for support. This represents a whole new orientation, rather than a modification.

The new look and new orientation is typified by the online lab offering each learner immediate feedback on their progress, a powerful and effective motivational tool. Indeed, this novel

approach to learning helps learners cope with the normal motivational peaks and troughs of language study. It assists in what is termed “initial motivation” (Dörnyei, 2001), when learners are motivated by the innate value of language learning since technology can easily harness high student interest in phones or computers or gaming devices and connect it with L2 learning. In the case of MyiZoneLab, it takes advantage of positive attitudes towards technology by providing online games that recycle language from the units in a stimulating and competitive milieu. To maintain motivation and stop it from ebbing away, learner autonomy provides students with real choices over what they learn (Dörnyei, 2001). The way online labs encourage self-study and flexibility in how much time to spend on tasks is of benefit in this process. Feedback is through the Gradebook, which records scores and submitted written assignments, again built into the instructional design of the course. Blended learning acknowledges that learners may need to engage with material in a variety of ways to aid comprehension and retention. This is of relevance to the debate in English teaching on a “principled eclecticism” in methodology (Harmer, 2007), with a need identified for teaching that satisfies the three strands of Engaging (the interest) of students, having them Study (alone and in groups), and Activating what they know and what they are learning (hence ESA). Without being tied to the four walls of a classroom, students study experientially by doing things for themselves, as well as by trial and error online. Rather than soaking up information, students activate their skills on a number of levels at the same time as studying language, dovetailing with recommendations of the EU on integrated learning via the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001). Learners apply new skills as they interact with a computer to follow the log in instructions and as they read and respond to prompts along the way. They are expected to navigate their own way through, choosing what to study, selecting their own

path, and leaving other parts to come back to later. This level of engagement differs greatly from a classroom where everyone studies in lockstep with the teacher, and when the physical space is determined for the students by someone else.

There is certainly a need for a greater challenge of learners, but it is incumbent upon instructors and course designers to offer greater support commensurate to the degree of difficulty of the task (Gibbons, 2009). The online lab supports lexis on demand (via the *Zoom in!* resource) and functional and spoken grammar (via the Grammar zone resource) to help learning in context, just at the time learners encounter the target item. Drawing on the Longman Corpus Network, learners accessing the online lab have access to a massive collection of spoken and written texts drawn from newspapers, books, radio, television and everyday conversations. The aim is to provide help at a click of the mouse away, with the visual clues and immediate needs foregrounded, while the technological working of the lab is backgrounded, to allow students to draw on it as a resource. The attempt is to match content to needs to be summoned up at will. For instance, avatars as virtual instructors give life to strategy training. These iTutors instruct students while introducing strategies for communication and pronunciation, providing examples of the strategy in use, and speaking as an imagined person to the learner. Through the online lab, this one-on-one coaching has numerous benefits, for, unlike a teacher speaking in unprepared discourse, the language the avatar uses is graded to be closer to the level of the listener, and the message is conveyed through the eyes by viewing the i-Tutor avatar, through the ears by listening to their message, and is capable of being cross-referred to the text on the screen. Such multimodal training can be repeated as many times as necessary for learners to become proficient in their fluency and accuracy. The process acknowledges that strategies need to

be noticed, explicitly taught and practised, just like any other aspect of language.

Naturally, the online lab should not be reduced to a mere training mechanism. The online lab recognizes that spoken practice and interaction in the classroom with peers and an instructor does not guarantee progress. Hence, spoken interaction is built in. Role plays are part of every unit at the Prepare stage, and students can take on the roles at anytime, wherever they log on, free from the need for a native English-speaking partner or teacher, and free from the confines of the classroom. Students can be both the person initiating the dialogue and the person responding. Crucially, this kind of practice allows for a space in which the students engage in planned discourse, before the more stressful unplanned interactions common to the classroom. The scaffolding of the task offers as much support as necessary, until it is time to engage in the same structured conversations with classmates and a teacher in class, and later moving on to freer and less structured spoken discourse without the support. It also provides crucial practice in the kinds of speaking tasks common to Internet-based tests of English. Face-to-face learning performance correspondingly benefits after the autonomous learning phase has been fully exploited. With the thorough additional preparation completed online, students come to class readier to launch into directed in-class learning, fully cognizant of the integrated nature of iZone's approach. The burden on the teacher is eased, since acculturation to the aims of the class is handled in advance.

The third way addressed in the title of the paper comes into sharper focus. In the words of Heinze (2008), it "triangulates" into self-study, online-facilitated learning, and face-to-face facilitated learning, with pragmatic implications for instructors, learners, and how they interact in their changing roles. At the pedagogical level, blended courses impact on communication, social interaction and assessment (Heinze, 2008). There is a consolidation stage

between online Prepare and the in-class presentation forming a bridge in the learning process: students come to class having studied the context and language and strategies and also having thought about the topic for themselves. Students bring questions about things they want to know more about or need clarification. The instructor introduces the in-class study by reviewing the online component, has students record their online scores as a check, expands on what has been introduced, and clarifies the unit goals. Likewise, Listen and Respond or Read and Respond parts of the unit (Todd & Palmer, 2009) introduce the same basic body of material unified with the online lab but presented in new ways. This multi-layered approach takes learning deeper and wider. For example, the same item of vocabulary is recycled in several different contexts, and collocates with a variety of other words. The strategic language is reintroduced in the text as Strategy in Action, offering options for listening to and practicing the communication strategy. Each step of the way, learning is built up, reconfigured, and consolidated before moving on. Language in Action, using data from the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, builds on this triangle of self-study, online study, and text-based study by giving students the opportunity to listen to and read the model conversation that they have previously practiced in the role-play online. Learners are able to use and manipulate the language in the process of it becoming part of their own. Model dialogues with substitutions allow students to stretch their language use beyond their own level while practicing the pronunciation point to improve their awareness of how English speakers actually speak. The fluency-based Communication Task is the culmination of these efforts, and its pair and group work is the main speaking task in the unit.

Integration inherent in the blended model of instruction may also help to address the conundrum of what students really know and what they really learn in

their language courses. In the model presented in this paper, the Activity Zone is a lighter pair or group speaking activity taking the unit theme to reinforce learning through use. Words and phrases from the unit are recycled one further time on the research-based assumption that students will only know a word, when they have met it countless times. This constant reinforcement acknowledges that some forgetting is normal in the process of language learning and that knowing a word in all its meanings and uses and collocations is a stiff challenge. By bringing back words and putting them to work in the conscious mind, more connections are made between and among different meanings. Students can, then, apply the language more freely and act out their own scripts using the Video extras, with the option of watching the full online video in class. There is, then, a self-assessment, called Checkpoint, where students are pushed to think about and evaluate the usefulness of what they have learnt by considering what they have enjoyed and found useful in the unit, and then assigning scores on a scale. This notion of ranking and expressing personal choices extends to a whole range of options in Online Extras. Features include the full version of the video with online activities, providing students with the choice of how much and what type of study is appropriate to their needs. Students are encouraged to give free range to their self-expression in the optional Writing tasks. Through writing emails, letters and other text types in English, they learn to express their own ideas in their own words. Again, these types of tasks are ideal for practice in Internet-based tests. Furthermore, instructors are able to respond to the writing and edit the work their students produce. A culminating activity is the online game, which helps develop creative problem solving abilities through word puzzles and competitive tasks. The online lab environment is ideally suited to gaming.

One final word goes to evaluation and the need for enhanced testing built into online labs, with testing acting as a positive,

necessary and sometimes neglected aid to learning. Ideally, a quiz should not function as an add-on, but as an essential feature to help learners find out precisely how much they have understood and can remember. The MyiZoneLab Quiz is integrated into the course to bridge the in-class and online parts of the course, and to give students immediate feedback on their progress. Testing acts as a powerful learning tool, and according to recent research (Carey, 2010), it is the very difficulty of tests (so-called “desirable difficulty”) that makes them so effective. The hard challenge of having to recall something that has been learned makes it that much harder to later forget. Hence, testing takes place online after every unit, as well as at mid-term, and at the end of the course. For the students, they have access to their grades and other resources precisely because of the blended structure. Oblinger (2003) describes how the Millennial generation demands experiential, interactive learning grounded in real-life situations, those which blended courses are able to provide. Information should be provided on demand, and waiting for the following week’s class to investigate questions no longer satisfies the yearning for answers and solutions now. Blended learning fills the gap between learner expectations of an online experience of gaining the knowledge and skills that they require and the top-down, face-to-face only factory model from a bygone age they are still offered by schools.

CONCLUSION

Blended learning cannot fulfill its promise if it functions merely as a delivery mechanism. It must offer a genuine alternative to print-only and online only, and it must demonstrate that combining high quality print materials with high quality content via online labs offers a superior learning outcome. Such a third way presupposes a more supportive and dynamic learning experience, with an emphasis on integrated

study, integrated teaching and integrated learning. This has been lacking until recent advances in ICT, and while blended learning may appear as a transitional stage towards higher quality second language learning, it is nonetheless a core component which makes that progression possible. By meeting the expectations of learners, it places their needs closer to the forefront of language instruction. The idea that technology interferes in the learning process can be laid to rest, and more pressing questions can henceforth be posed, such as about the extent to which face-to-face learning alone can be depended on. This reframing of the debate is one anticipated outcome, and another is that the showcasing of a representative blended environment in this paper will lead to a fuller appreciation of blended learning’s applicability in ELT.

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