

This chapter will define and explore the term *blended learning*. It will look at the reasons why it is important for language teachers to incorporate technology into their courses, and focus on some factors influencing the uptake of technology.

What is blended learning?

Blended learning refers to a language course which combines a face-to-face (F2F) classroom component with an appropriate use of technology. The term *technology* covers a wide range of recent technologies, such as the Internet, CD-ROMs and interactive whiteboards. It also includes the use of computers as a means of communication, such as chat and email, and a number of environments which enable teachers to enrich their courses, such as VLEs (virtual learning environments) (see page 108), blogs (see page 115) and wikis (see page 119).

We will assume that you have decided to incorporate technology into a language course for a pedagogical reason, and by doing so, you are adding value to the teaching. We cover the use of technology inside the language classroom, as well as in support of a course where learners access technology between their classes. The book covers the use of technology in both structured ways, where learners work on specific tasks assigned by their teacher, and unstructured ways, where they browse materials and gain extra exposure and practice in the language.

A blended-learning course is potentially greater than the sum of its parts, and positive learning outcomes are most apparent when clear roles are assigned to the teacher and to the technology.

The term *blended learning* has been used for a long time in the business world. There, it refers to a situation where an employee can continue working full time and simultaneously take a training course. Such a training course may use a web-based platform. Many companies are attracted by the potential of blended learning as a way of saving costs; employees do not need to take time out of work to attend a seminar; they can work on their course in their own time, at their own convenience and at their own pace. Companies around the world have moved parts of their in-house training onto e-learning platforms, and use sophisticated tools such as learning-management systems in order to organize the course content. The mode of delivery may include CD-ROM, web-based training modules and paper-based manuals.

Many of the benefits described above are also applicable to language teaching. The term *blended learning* can be applied to a very broad range of teaching and learning situations. It is commonly applied to a course where all the learners meet with the teacher in a face-to-face (F2F) class, but in which the course includes a parallel self-study component such as a CD-ROM or access to web-based materials. Use of these elements may be optional. Learners can be set pre-lesson tasks or specific homework tasks between the F2F classes. It is becoming more frequent that the technology is always available in class, and is used as and when it is appropriate.

The term *blended learning* has a range of meanings. This is not a new phenomenon in ELT, where many terms have several interpretations – *task* and *authentic* for instance.

Here are a number of typical definitions:

- a 'combination of online and in-person, classroom learning activities' (<http://www.cybermediacreations.com/elearning/glossary.htm>)
- learning or training events or activities where e-learning, in its various forms, is combined with more traditional forms of training such as 'classroom' training (<http://www.intelera.com/glossary.htm>)
- the combination of multiple approaches to teaching or to educational processes which involve the deployment of a diversity of methods and resources (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blended_learning)
- combining ... (different) web-based technologies (Driscoll)
- combining pedagogical approaches (Driscoll)
- a 'mixture of face-to-face ... and distance learning' (Frendo, 2005)
- combining e-learning with ... F2F (Smith and Baber, 2005)

For many, blended learning is 'nothing new' (Claypole, 2003) – merely the logical extension of what we do already. The term has also been criticized. It can be seen as a 'compromise' position. A blended-learning course run without a principled approach may be seen as an 'eclectic' blending together of course components, and can end up as rather a mish-mash. There may be little or no relation between the taught and the online components of a course. In a worst-case scenario, learners may suffer the 'worst of both worlds' – those not enjoying the online component being forced to participate in web-based communication, and those happier communicating online having to attend classes. On the other hand, done well, blended learning can exploit the best of both worlds. Carefully chosen online materials can enhance the classroom component of the course, and learners have the opportunity to work at their own pace and follow their own interests. The outside world can be brought into the classroom, improving motivation and generating interest. This chapter concludes with our own principles, which we feel important to delivering a blended-learning course.

An overview of this book

This book covers many of the growing range of technologies used in ELT, and describes how they can be integrated into a number of teaching and learning situations. The growth of the Internet has radically changed English-language teaching. Chapter 2 focuses on the Web, the part of the Internet where websites live. The chapter is divided into three sections: the first focuses on searching skills, and explores ways of searching more effectively; the second discusses ways of using some of the vast amount of authentic material available on the Web as part of a blended-learning language course; and the final section provides some practical ideas which you can incorporate into your teaching.

Chapter 3 looks at ELT material. It considers the way that the coursebook has been transformed and is now supported by a whole range of supplementary materials, including CD-ROM and online material on the publisher's website. The chapter also focuses on the Macmillan English Campus, which places a significant volume of learners' course material onto the Web for access within and outside the classroom. Finally, the chapter looks at

some authoring tools which allow teachers to create interactive online materials for their own learners.

Chapter 4 looks at the opportunities afforded by electronic dictionaries. You may previously have raised learners' awareness of the benefits of using paper-based dictionaries. Today, learners have access to CD-ROM dictionaries and a range of dictionaries on the Web. They may bring electronic translators to the classroom. These tools help learners to develop their study skills and provide opportunities for them to enrich their vocabulary outside the classroom.

Chapter 5 looks at some commonly available software and examines the way that computers have become 'normalized' – a term used by Stephen Bax to describe a situation where technology is used so appropriately that it has become invisible. For example, in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context, learners compose texts for their lecturers without noticing the many benefits of being able to cut and paste text, or use a spell-checker to review and edit their work. The chapter also looks at the benefits of using software such as Microsoft PowerPoint, which is rapidly taking over from overhead projectors (OHPs) and becoming the norm for presentations.

Chapter 6 focuses on interactive whiteboards. Teachers who are lucky enough to teach using an interactive whiteboard are able to embed technology in their lessons in exciting ways. One teacher commented that the IWB has opened up her classroom to the real world. She uses the Internet wherever appropriate, and learners bring in the PowerPoint presentations they have prepared at home in order to show them to the class. This is very much a blended-learning scenario.

Chapter 7 looks at portable devices, such as Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), digital audio recorders and camcorders. Teachers can create and distribute course materials which learners can access and respond to at a time and place convenient to them.

Chapter 8 looks at computer-mediated communication, or CMC. This refers to situations as diverse as communicating through the keyboard with penpals overseas, sending an email across the world, or making a telephone call across the Internet, using a system such as Skype™. The chapter covers the range of ways in which learners and teachers can communicate through the medium of the computer. It then describes the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in language teaching. A group of learners at university may meet in class, and then communicate with each other informally through Chat; discuss the topic of their next lesson using a forum; email their tutor; and receive their course materials on their VLE. *Blended learning* is a term which is frequently applied to a situation when a course is delivered partly through F2F classes and partly through CMC (computer-mediated communication).

One logical extreme of integrating CMC tools in language teaching would be to run a course wholly online. It could be argued that in such a course, a teacher is present in many of the interactions, monitoring the interactions in a virtual classroom or answering emails. However, this book will not focus specifically on the role and skills of the purely online tutor, although some of these practices are mentioned in Chapter 8. In our definition of blended learning, we assume that teachers and learners meet in the classroom at some points during the course. An online tutor never meets the learners in person. For a detailed look at the methodology of online tutoring, there are a number of excellent books available. We particularly recommend *E-tivities* by Gilly Salmon (2002), which specifically focuses on online teaching.

Chapter 9 looks at creating your own materials. We will look at the way teachers communicate with their learners using blogs, and how learners can build up a sense of community and collaboration using a class wiki.

Chapter 10 concludes the book with a brief look at the future. Given the speed at which new technologies are developed, introduced and gain a myriad of uses, both intended and unexpected, the supporting website will keep you abreast of these exciting changes, and how they influence and affect language teaching.

Using technology in language teaching

Why use technology in language teaching? What opportunities does it offer? We believe that there are many. Firstly, using technology can be motivating. Playing language-learning games is one example of this, with learners enjoying tasks, and at the same time deriving learning benefits through recycling of language. Many learners simply like using the computer. They like multimedia exercises, as they can proceed at their own pace. They can make their own choices as to how to work through the materials.

Secondly, the 'interactivity' of language exercises can be highly beneficial. Web-based exercises are more interactive than paper-based exercises. This can appeal to many learners. Setting learners to work on an interactive exercise can add variety to the class. It offers them a chance to review language in a different way – perhaps doing a mix-and-match exercise game with collocations they have just learned.

Thirdly, the type of feedback which good interactive materials provide is appreciated by learners. They can get instant feedback on what they have done. Figure 1.1 shows an example of an interactive, online exercise from the Macmillan English Campus.

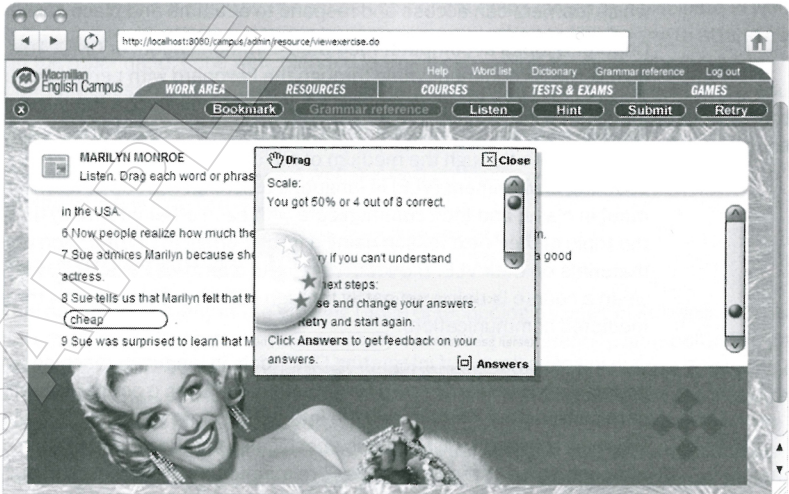


Figure 1.1
Language feedback
on web-based
exercises

Learners can see that they have scored, in the above example, 7 out of 9. This is also given in % terms. At this point, the user has three options:

- [Close] change their answers
- [Retry] clear their answers and start the exercise again
- [Answers] see which answers are correct and which are incorrect

The instant feedback offered by technology on exercises is usually perceived as helpful. Learners can make choices as to how many times they redo an exercise.

One of the great benefits mentioned earlier in this chapter relates to the opportunities afforded by CMC (computer-mediated communication). The computer is used to enable communication between two groups (teacher and learner, for instance) separated by time, distance or both. Supporting a course with technology can allow learners and teacher more flexibility in both time and place. Between classes, learners can access their materials whenever they want to. For example, EAP learners who take poor lecture notes can access the tutors' handouts on the VLE; this can have a dramatic effect on their revision, enabling them to complete their notes at a later date.

Learners today have high expectations when it comes to technology. Younger learners, the 'digital natives', are part of the Net generation and expect a language school to offer opportunities to use technology in their courses, for example via a well-equipped self-access centre. Business English learners practising giving a PowerPoint presentation expect to be videoed and to receive feedback from the teacher on their presentation skills as well as their English.

The use of technology outside the language classroom can make learners more autonomous. One key feature of using technology in learning is that it allows language practice and study away from the confines of the classroom. That could be in a hotel room, the office, an Internet café or, of course, at home. As learners become used to evaluating and selecting materials, they are able to plan out their own use of web-based materials in their own time. This helps them to become independent learners.

The use of technology can be time saving. Posting course materials online for learners to access can save the teacher the time and expense of photocopying. A teacher who prepares and saves a lesson in an interactive whiteboard can recycle the lesson with the next group, so any investment in preparation time can be made worthwhile. Of course, the time taken to become familiar with technology needs to be factored in, and this should not be underestimated. Nor should that obscure the benefits of teachers using a bank of shared electronic materials.

In addition, the use of technology can be current. Using a listening activity with today's news in the language classroom from a website such as the BBC's can add a dimension of immediacy to a lesson. This can supplement the traditional role of published materials, which tend to have a longer shelf life.

When we consider the role of technology, it is very helpful to distinguish between the language skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking). These have traditionally been divided into productive and receptive skills. Clearly, there are differences in the type of practice required to develop each of the four skills.

In the area of the receptive skills of listening and reading, it is possible to identify a clear rôle played by a web-based environment in providing exposure. Listening to digital audio, learners have the opportunity to pause at will, and listen and read a transcript. Reading on-screen, learners can access meaning on demand by clicking on a hyperlink to find out the meaning of a word.

The productive skills of speaking and writing are significantly different, in that the assessment of the output of speaking and writing activities does rely on human interpretation. Although writing is in a sense ideally matched with the keyboard, nevertheless we would prefer a free composition to be evaluated and graded by a teacher.

We would also wish for a teacher to evaluate and give language feedback on a discussion. Spelling and grammar checkers cannot replace teacher assessment (and will not pick up every error – see Chapter 5).

There are, as we all know, a number of concerns which are frequently expressed about using technology. Critics of computer-based interactive exercises argue that ‘stimulus–response’ activities such as mix-and-match, gap-fill and true/false activities are essentially boring. They are informed by behaviourist principles and fly in the face of more communicative approaches. The traditional role of computers in grammar has been disparagingly called ‘drill and kill’. The types of feedback offered on many exercises are seen as limiting. Also, many teachers continue to have concerns about the reliability of technology.

While some of these fears may be genuine, there are clearly many benefits to be derived from integrating technology into teaching and learning. There are many factors which influence the extent to which teachers use technology in their courses. We will now look at some of these.

Factors influencing the uptake of blended learning

A number of important factors exist which will influence the use of technology in language courses. These include attitude, level, the volume and type of teacher training organized, your own and your learners’ access to these resources, and cost.

Teachers and learners may hold positive, negative or neutral attitudes towards technology. Attitudes range across a spectrum or cline, from technophile to technophobic. Having a stance of ‘healthy scepticism’ is one approach to hearing about a new technology. In our view, it is equally important to be able to see the potential benefits.

The learners’ level may be an influencing factor in which type of technology you use and how often it is used. One example is a low-level learner, reaching saturation point on a one-to-one course. You may decide to set this learner up on a CD-ROM to practise colours, numbers, days of the week or months of the year. The guided practice is a welcome break from the demands of the course, and provides review and consolidation.

Teacher training is a vital factor in the uptake of new technology. It is useful to consider which areas and knowledge are useful for teachers – what do you need to know today about the area of technology in ELT? We recommend that every teacher acquires a basic knowledge about using technology in ELT and skills to incorporate technology into their courses. These we term ‘core skills’. Core skills include, for example, knowing which websites, interactive materials and useful CD-ROMs to recommend your learners, and how CD-ROM dictionaries work. In terms of skills, you should have the ability to search the Web efficiently, create a worksheet from text and pictures, and be able to evaluate materials downloaded from the Web and web-based exercises.

When you have acquired these core skills, there are many ways they can be extended: learning about interactive whiteboards and how to create PowerPoint presentations, for instance. Another useful skill is knowing how to link an electronic data projector to a laptop for an in-class presentation.

At an advanced level, you may wish to learn how to use tools for creating online materials or podcasts. You may wish to use course-building tools in a virtual learning environment, or use video-conferencing facilities.

Your own access to technology, and what access is available to your learners, is key to how it is incorporated in your courses. Computers are becoming more and more common in language teaching. The digital divide certainly exists, with some areas of education and some parts of the globe being well supplied with computers and interactive whiteboards, and other parts of the world with a low level of Internet access, or slow connection speeds. Nevertheless, common trends include a rise in broadband connections, more learners with access to computers both in school and at home, and more data projectors.

Finally, an obvious factor is cost. When a new technology is first developed and introduced onto the market, it may have a high cost. Consider the early days of the data projector or the first CD-ROMs. When a technology becomes popular and ubiquitous, costs fall. This issue is clearly an important factor influencing the uptake of, say, interactive whiteboards.

Having looked at some of the reasons for using technology in language teaching and learning, and some of the factors which contribute to its successful integration, we will conclude with some guiding principles which we would argue enable teachers to tap into the potential for 'blended learning'.

Balancing traditional approaches and technology

In our consideration of a blended-learning approach, we are guided by four key principles.

1 Separate the role of the teacher and the role of the technology

It is important to consider the respective roles of the teacher and technology. Although there may be areas of overlap, it is important not to see the teacher and technology as interchangeable and to clearly distinguish what each can do that the other cannot. In other words, we are not concerned that the teacher will be replaced by the computer because the teacher and the technology play different roles. Let us examine these.

The teacher is there to do a number of things which require human interaction: firstly, to perform a needs analysis. The teacher tests the learners and may also get to know them in terms of personality and attitude. He or she can be supported in this task by technology (an adaptive test on CD-ROM; an Excel spreadsheet; needs-analysis software to help placement, such as the *Business English Generator*), but, we would insist, not replaced by technology.

The teacher will then create the learning syllabus. Again, a computer may play a role in this (Office software, for instance), but decisions such as the choice of conversation topic are in the remit of the experienced professional. The teacher in the classroom writes the lesson plan and delivers the class. He or she will then interpret the materials, moderate the fluency sessions, react to learner utterances and so on. The teacher is there to deal with 'fuzzy' areas of language, to set and follow up 'free practice'. Language comprises both predictable and unpredictable elements. The number of possible utterances is potentially infinite, and the teacher needs to develop learners' ability to react to the unexpected, usually in a fluency classes.

Technology does some things better than the teacher – lightning-fast searches of an electronic dictionary is one example. The technology is available 24/7. It can offer endless exposure to the target language. The technology offers learners the possibility to control the exposure they receive – in a CD-ROM program, for example. Learners can pause an audio clip at will, play it as many times as they like, or redo an exercise until they feel satisfied with their result. This phenomenon has been described as the 'computer acting as workhorse'.

As we have outlined earlier in this chapter, the technology can offer limitless opportunities for 'guided practice' and consolidation. Learners can do lots of extra language practice outside the classroom. The computer does not get tired! Technology can give feedback on 'crisp' areas of language, such as grammar rules. There is clearly a role for computers in helping learners gain practice in using language in guided situations.

In a blended approach, we would separate the role of the teacher and the role of the technology. A blended approach sees the roles of teachers and technology as complementary. Artificial intelligence (AI) is not yet sufficiently developed to cope with real-world interactions in any but predictable exchanges, and there is no danger of it replacing the language teacher.

2 Teach in a principled way

Whenever a new technology appears, there is something which is called the 'wow' effect. However, we should not be seduced by the novelty, we should always focus on the learners' needs. We should ask ourselves whether the technology will improve teaching and enhance learning. We must ensure that the teaching is driven by the pedagogy and supported by the technology.

Occasionally, the technology may be used simply 'because it is there' – as in the case of a language game being played at the end of the day. Even in this situation, the teacher may be adding variety to the lesson, and allowing learners to consolidate the language.

3 Use technology to complement and enhance F2F teaching

The practical activities in this book assume that the technology in some ways complements and enhances a classroom activity. Learners may play a game which recycles language in a fun context. Similarly, integration is a key concept. If there is a close correlation between the content of the lesson and the online materials, the online material will be used more enthusiastically.

4 'It's not so much the program, more what you do with it' (Jones, 1986)

This famous observation was made a relatively long time ago in technological terms and it still, in our view, holds true. Let us look at three ways of using a CD-ROM. Firstly, a learner buys a complete English course on CD-ROM, sits at home and follows the course. We do not think this addresses the complex issues involved in learning a language. Speaking a language has a social dimension – we communicate with others. This particular use of the technology over-emphasizes the guided-practice element of language learning at the expense of real-time communication. Secondly, a CD-ROM can also complement a taught course. The teacher practises the present perfect tense using learner names, real-world examples and local context. There may be authentic interaction, clarification and restricted use of the language (Scrivener, 2005). Then, in the self-study period or at home, the learner consolidates using the exercises set by the teacher. This model of blended learning can be effective. Thirdly, a CD-ROM may be used in class as part of a presentation, using an electronic projector, in ways that the creators of the disk never envisaged when they wrote the exercise rubric. Here, it may be used in ways which promote communication between the learners.

In conclusion, we have seen that the term *blended learning* can have a range of meanings. We have defined it as referring to a language course which combines a F2F (face-to-face) classroom component with an appropriate use of technology. We have suggested that the technology can be integrated into the language lessons, or be used by learners outside the classroom for further practice, and to complement the taught element of the course.