

# Review on “Blended Learning” in Language Teaching

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## Abstract

As blended learning enters the college English reform in China, more and more researchers have made attempts to explore the effects of blended learning context. This paper intends to make an overview of application of it in English teaching in China by reviewing 20 papers published in core journals, with an aim to get a picture of the current situation of blended learning research and application in Chinese context. Thus reasonable suggestions are offered for appropriate approaches to more fully fulfill the role of blended learning in English teaching modernization in China.

**Keywords:** review, blended learning, language teaching

## 1. Introduction

On 13 March, 2012, Ministry of Education of PRC issued “Education Informatization Development Plan for Ten Years (2011-2020)” and clearly put forward the idea that education informatization drives education modernization. Therefore, the integration of information technology into education has become a hot issue and education reform based on this idea has got under way and become popular. Blended learning as a new learning model is in accordance with this teaching philosophy, and it plays a very important role in transforming and promoting quality of higher education with its force and development prospects (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Sun, 2015).

With the popularity and practicality of blended learning, the paper intends to make an overview of application of it in English teaching in China, with an aim to get a clear picture of the current situation with regard to blended learning, and offer reasonable suggestions for further practice and research, thus moving forward to fulfilling the modernization of English teaching in a well-constructed blended learning context.

The author made a rough search in the database of CNKI (Chinese National Knowledge Internet) with the key words “blended learning” and “English”, and found out studies focusing on the implementation of blended learning in English teaching have covered a lot of areas in theory and practice with roughly more than 180 officially published papers from year of 2000 till now. For the core journals are representative of the latest research trend, the 20 papers in core journals published in China were chosen for the review.

## 2. Blended Learning

“Blended learning” is a term first employed in enterprise training for its convenience and flexibility with combination of online and face-to-face training in 1990s. ASTD (American Society for Training and Development) views it as one of the top trends for knowledge dissemination (Tian & Fu, 2004). On the other hand, researchers and educators have reflected the validity of popular e-learning and tried to find a more effective way to fully develop advantages of online individual learning and traditional face-to-face interaction. The blended learning model as a better combination thus gains growing attention from many fields such as extension of its employment in higher education. Many studies have been conducted by scholars home and abroad to prove its necessity and effectiveness on campus education (Güzer & Caner, 2014).

Professor He Kekang introduced the idea of “blended learning” to China and defined it as combination of advantages of traditional learning and e-learning: to perform full play of teacher’s leading role in guidance, inspiration and supervision, as well as the learner’s body role in their initiative and creativity (He, 2004). Scholars in China have probed into application of blended learning in English teaching in terms of theory and practice.

### 3. Review of Blended Learning in Language Teaching

#### 3.1 Theoretical Research on Blended Learning

Tian and Fu (2004) made a preliminary study on “blended learning” in terms of definition home and abroad, implications for education and design principles, which unfolds a clear overview of blended learning. In the paper, it is pointed out that blended learning primarily emerged as an extension of e-learning for enterprise training, it is still applicable in education. Moreover, it is emphasized that guiding principles for blended learning in teaching background should focus on need analysis of learning contents, learners and learning objectives. This preliminary study offers practical guidelines for further research in language teaching based on blended learning. Hu (2009) made a further attempt to re-evaluated the definitions of “blended learning” and proposed that “blended” means appropriate location for each element in a teaching context. By analyzing some cases in different universities, the author clarified that “blended learning” should be adapted to learners, learning subjects, learning process and learning environment. Both of the two studies focus on the learner elements in blended learning.

As for the teaching elements, Zhao (2004) made a deep insight on blended learning from the perspectives covering college English teaching, English teaching methodology, and the reform of college English teaching. The main purpose of the paper is to intensify the important role of educational technology in language teaching reform with blended learning as an optimized teaching and learning process.

Similarly, Wang (2006) first elaborated the five dimensions of blended learning: teaching construction (teacher as a guiding role +learner as a subject), teaching design (teaching and learning with equal stress), learning mode, teaching media and teaching contents. And as an extension of the theoretical elaboration, a teaching unit for non-English majors was illustrated, which was made up of pre-class guidance, while-class teaching and discussing, after-class questions and answers sections based on the five dimensions. In the same way, based on the learning system of blackboard network teaching platform, Huang and Li (2014) designed a unit of English teaching to show the blended learning model consisting of class preparation, classroom teaching and after-class assignment. By describing teaching and learning activities the authors pointed out that blended learning model may result in learners’ better performance in cooperation awareness and learning autonomy.

In a more comprehensive way, from both teaching and learning perspectives, Xie (2010) talked about the theoretical background embedded in blended learning in language teaching practice, which included constructivism and behaviorism. Taking a college English course named Integrated English as an example, the author designed a teaching unit for English majors, which consists of three modules as pre-class, while-class and after-class activities. But different from the design of the previous studies, the author also involved assessment as an indispensable part in a blended learning context, and offered some practical ways to evaluate learners’ language performance with the combination of summative and formative assessments.

Besides, Zhen (2013) also designed a teaching mode for English writing course based on the theory of blended learning, with five writing steps of preparation, first draft, feedback, revise and rewriting integrated into online and classroom teaching. The author emphasized that blended learning promotes the combination of task-based teaching and individual learning, and most importantly improves the learners’ writing self-efficacy.

The above studies advocated the application of blended learning, and clearly expounded corresponding components in this kind of learning model, from which we can get an overview of blended learning and work out appropriate application in English teaching context in China. Some researchers designed teaching units based on the theory, hoping blended learning model may work very well as it is supposed to do. What they lack is the proving process for the effectiveness of the teaching design. Factors that may interfere during the process of blended learning should be taken into consideration. The subsequent empirical studies covered the above issues from different perspectives.

#### 3.2 Empirical Studies in English Language Teaching With Application of Blended Learning

Empirical studies in English language teaching extends application of blended learning from different courses to both teachers’ and learners’ behavior.

In different English courses, researchers have worked out more about blended learning mode. For example, Jin et al. (2012) conducted an empirical study on blended learning application in online writing course. 22 PhD students were chosen as the participants. The study shows that face-to-face classroom teaching combined with online course may lessen students’ writing anxiety and increase confidence. Moreover, blended learning proved an effective way of strengthening interaction between student and teacher as well as among students.

Comparative studies were also conducted to prove the effectiveness and appropriateness of blended learning in English courses. By way of quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (English writing test) analysis, Wang (2011) explored the influence of blended learning on English writing proficiency of 170 non-English majors. The students undergoing 18 weeks of blended learning for their writing course performed better than their counterparts with traditional classroom teaching background, and their writing texts were improved significantly in lexical complexity, lexical density and average word length compared with those at the very beginning of blended learning application. Moreover, the experimental group gained more positive intrinsic motivation under the influence of blended learning. Similarly, Meng (2011) compared English writing courses under traditional classroom teaching and blended mode (multi-media, network and face-to-face teaching). The result is in accordance with the findings in Wang (2011)' study: in a blended learning context, learners performed better than those in traditional classroom teaching in the overall score of writing tests, writing self-efficacy, word-choice and sentence length. One of the reasons is that online writing platform helps to overcome the learners anxiety in English writing. More comprehensive than Wang' results, it also found out that the main problems learners may encounter in a blended learning context lie in their lack of online learning strategies and poor self-regulation on their online behaviors.

Other empirical studies extended their visions to probe into learner or teacher factors in a blended leaning context. With regard to learner factors, Liu and Zha (2009)' study focused on the English learning motivation and strategies under blended learning environment. The analysis of questionnaire data from 800 college students shows positive effect of blended learning on students' English performance and learning motivation. But students' poor choice and employment of online learning strategies show that it is very important for teachers to guide students in employing proper learning strategies in their individual study process since strategy choice has great effect on their English performance. In another study by Ma and Jiang (2013), 543 non-English majors have experienced blended learning of English listening course and then finished a questionnaire designed by the researcher. They were asked about their view, wants and problems in blended learning process. It was found that 60% of the students thought blended teaching model was helpful in improving their listening ability since it was very flexible for them to arrange self-learning time. On the other hand, as Liu & Zhang's have found out, in this study students still faced many problems in this kind of teaching model such as less concentration, poor listening strategy employment and so on in the online learning process. So from the two studies it can be concluded that how to maximize the teacher's instruction in online hours for the students and enhance their learning autonomy and effectiveness call for settlement.

With the similar view on learners' need analysis, Zhao and Yuan (2010) made an investigation on the factors affecting students' satisfaction in blended environment. Students from 29 departments participated in the investigation by way of questionnaire and they delivered a high satisfaction rate for the blended learning environment. The analysis shows that e-learning adaptability, perceived usefulness, timely responses from the teachers and course applicability are key factors that affect their satisfaction.

Some researches focused on the particular aspect of blended learning that may enhance learning. Chen and Wang (2013) made a meta-analysis of 47 experimental and quasi-experimental studies on the effectiveness of blended learning and E-learning on student learning outcomes and confirmed the point that blended learning environment assist students in gaining better performance in their learning than E-learning or face-to-face teaching. It pointed out that collaborative learning plays a very important role and should gain more attention from teachers and learners for achieving advanced learning outcomes in a blended learning context. Guided by the theory of blended learning and collaborative learning, Zhang (2013) constructed an integrative teaching model of "classroom cooperative learning+online individual learning+ web-based cooperative learning after-class", which further proved that web-based cooperative learning and learning autonomy interacted very well in this blended learning context. And learners benefited much from the interaction with the teacher and among learners, which was reflected in the questionnaire that more than 80% of the participants thought they developed their critical thinking skills in problem solving in such multi-dimensional interaction mode. Furthermore, in the study, diversified assessments such as mid-term test, team work, oral report, writing assignments, etc proved to assist in getting a more comprehensive picture of learners' learning outcomes and language competence.

With regard to teacher factors, Chen and Guo (2009) made an investigation on the teachers' teaching beliefs guided by blended learning reform from five aspects: teaching methods, materials, teacher's role, face to face classroom teaching and online independent learning as well as ways of assessment. The 92 participants come from one of the demonstration colleges of college English teaching reform issued by Chinese Ministry of Education in China. And the college has undergone college English teaching reform based on blended learning for 7 years, so the study can be representative in some way. The investigation result shows that generally,

teachers hold accurate beliefs on teaching elements in the process of college English teaching reform, but still there were some discrepancies among their beliefs and blended learning modes as well as corresponding practice. For some of the teachers, there was lack of knowledge and practice in network teaching platform.

#### 4. Summary

To sum up, in China blended learning has been introduced and applied in college English reform, and has demonstrated its impact on language teaching in a positive way (Chen & Wang, 2013). Researchers in China have made attempts to probe into theories and practice of blended learning as an indispensable part of education modernization. From the above review of 20 papers published in core journals in China, it is shown that early studies focused more on theoretical discussion of blended learning, which covered both teaching and learning elements such as allocation of teaching resources, learner and teacher needs, learning process, etc. And some studies offered suggested or detailed language teaching designs based on the theoretical guidance of blended learning. Subsequent empirical studies corresponded with the issues addressed in the earlier theoretical studies and made further exploration of blended learning application in different courses both qualitatively and quantitatively. Still there is some room for consideration for further research.

First, more than 98% of the papers concern blended learning with college English teaching with college students as participants. Only one of them (Zhang & Wu, 2015) talked about blended learning application in vocational education. Taking the course “air business English” as an example, the author first made an investigation based on learning needs and industry requirements for students from vocational schools, and combined “small private online course” with “task-based language teaching” to create a blended learning environment. It also proved that in such a learning context graduates could be better fit for the industry needs with certain practical capabilities and find jobs suitable for themselves. Therefore, blended learning application can be extended to more levels of English teaching accordingly in the future research. Moreover, another study (Geng, 2011) involved postgraduates’ English teaching as an example to provide some suggestions on curriculum provision, teaching modes and methods. More studies with different participants of different levels in different English courses are needed to test the practicality of blended learning, since the previous studies focused more on English writing and listening courses for non-English majors.

Secondly, in terms of teaching design, more studies are needed to conduct need analysis first to meet different needs from learners in different courses. Learning needs such as learning contents, learner factors, learning objectives should be taken into consideration as appropriate and effective preparation of blended learning context. Moreover, only a few studies talked about the assessment importance or ways, more elaborated evaluation design should be included since comprehensive assessment is essential to offer evidence for learners’ language performance as well as effectiveness of blended learning.

Thirdly, as the above studies mentioned, learners’ self-regulation on online study remains a major challenge in blended learning context. Therefore, empirical studies on learner autonomy, self-regulation and online learning strategy choice are suggested to probe deeper into the learning process, thus providing proper process monitoring system to aid learners in efficient language acquisition. Moreover, cooperative or teamwork awareness can be enhanced as mentioned in the early studies, so future studies may focus on this element as an extension for the effectiveness of blended learning.

Finally, in such a technology-driven education reform, teachers in blended learning environment encounter new requirements and challenges. Since the teacher-learner construction has transformed compared with that in traditional teaching, how to teach and how to motivate learners to be engaged in learning process call for more efforts from the teachers (Yang & He, 2008). Teaching abilities such as effective questioning, proper instruction, online management of learners’ performance, etc pose challenges for teachers. Therefore, from both learning and teaching perspectives, there is still a long way for researchers to explore well-constructed blended learning contexts in China.

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