

Blended Learning in a Heterogeneous Classroom - A Prerequisite for Effective Learning

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2024

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 20.11.2024

Accepted: 16.12.2024

Published: 20.12.2024

Citation:

Supriya, A. "Blended Learning in a Heterogeneous Classroom - A Prerequisite for Effective Learning." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 13, no. S1, 2024, pp. 33-39.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v13iS1-Dec.8516>

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Abstract

Teaching English in India requires diversified methods to cater to the needs of different learners in a classroom. These diverse methods are life savers for teachers and students. This paper accentuates the need for Blended Learning as a potential method to enhance English Language Teaching in a heterogeneous classroom atmosphere. Though students understand and interpret literature, they still find it difficult to be proficient in the language, especially with speaking, as they come from different vernacular medium of instruction. Students are very much exposed to media and this aspect can be used to teach them vocabulary, phrases, accent and find means to received pronunciation which play a prominent role in the LSRW skills, which are basically considered the key aspects of acquiring a language. Blended Learning can be effectively used for this purpose. This paper elaborates on how this cumulative effort not only encourages but also engages students in participatory learning. This also equips and empowers an individual to learn the language. With the teacher as a facilitator, and students being active participants of Blended Learning, this becomes a personalized way of learning, producing effective results.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Heterogeneous Classroom, Diverse Medium, Media, Participatory Learning, English Language

Introduction

A classroom consists of students from different vernacular medium and it is profound that every individual's caliber is different. Each individual has a different approach towards learning and comprehending lessons based on their background, board of study, upbringing, experience and various other factors. Howard Gardner's Multiple intelligence theory also advocates the same, emphasizing on different abilities under the same roof. MI (Multiple Intelligence) theory has laid a foundation for the framework of student-centered learning. One of the most significant contributions of the MI theory in the field of education is that it encourages teachers to recognize and address the diverse learning needs of each learner.

"In an EFL/ESL setting, teachers can create a more inclusive and productive learning environment if they are fully aware of the fact that every student has specific strengths and areas that need further focus and improvement" (Qasserras and Qasserras).

In consequence, it is the core responsibility of a teacher to offer instructions in a way that could cater the needs of individual learner helping them improve in their learning outcomes.

"Teaching with multiple intelligences provided students with several learning opportunities as well as allowing them to demonstrate their abilities and develop a strong desire to learn" (Qasserras and Qasserras).

On such a notice it has been a hard time for teachers to curate the lesson plan accordingly meeting the necessity of every individual also ensuring on the progress of the learner in a heterogeneous classroom, especially with 50: 1 ratio, meaning one teacher for fifty students. With larger number of audiences, the teacher finds it difficult to communicate and reach out with concerns about an individual's progress. Though, traditional method helps in developing a personal connectivity with the student, the teacher has to inculcate technology in the learning to tailor personalized learning, also ensuring the students are well equipped and updated in the field of advancement in relation to academics.

“Blended learning is the engine that can power personalization and competency-based learning. Just as technology enables mass customization in so many sectors to meet the diverse needs of so many people, online learning can allow students to learn any time, in any place, on any path, and at any pace - at scale” (Horn and Staker).

This study finds Blended Learning a newfangled result of enabling the teacher making student centered learning possible amidst diverse medium of students and the requisite to imply blended learning in ELT classrooms.

The Requisite of Blended Learning

“Blended learning is: Any formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace;” (Horn and Staker).

Making classrooms solely AI based learning might seem like a boon but rather, an individual is unable to solely rely on such platforms for authentic information. However, a student needs the guidance of a teacher in learning lessons online.

“At its most basic level, it lets students fast-forward if they have already mastered a concept, pause if they need to digest something, or rewind and slow something down if they need to review. It provides a simple way for students to take different paths toward a common destination. It can free up teachers to become learning designers, mentors, facilitators, tutors, evaluators, and counsellors to reach each student in ways never before possible” (Horn and Staker).

AI only answers to the predominant questions that are posted, whereas a teacher studies the students' requirement, analyses the individual's preconceived knowledge over the subject and then delivers the required content in the required form.

“The offline and online class complements each other. A cautious- planning for written/ created resources, instructions, content materials, online tools that students can use in doing the activities supported the students to achieve the learning objectives” (Binnendyk).

Blended Learning is a perfect amalgamation of traditional classroom method, with the advancement of technology proving to help students achieve the learning objectives.

Heterogeneous classroom at colleges in semi- urban and rural regions of Tamil Nadu, has a mixture of students from Tamil medium, students from different boards, students with language barriers who are not much exposed to the English language, along with students who are proficient in the language.

Shan and Aziz states that “Teaching English Language is deemed challenging and arduous for English Language teachers, particularly when it is done in rural settings where students have minimal English Language exposure”. In this regard, the teaching methodology should administer personalized approach converging the necessities of every individual.

“A personalized approach also implies that students can receive a one-on-one learning experience when they need it, but can also partake in group projects and activities when that would be best for their learning” (Horn and Staker).

Blended Learning collectively meets the necessity of each and every individual irrespective of difference in vernacular mediums. Blended Learning exposes the learner to various opportunities set before his/her, also providing the leverage of having the teacher to assist oneself with doubts, queries and clarification,

simultaneously the content is authenticated and reviewed by the teacher as there is no evidence in the accuracy given by the AI. With Blended Learning the instructor implements various modalities for the benefit of the individual.

“When we say “modalities,” we mean the different mediums and formats in which a student learns - whether the learning occurs online, offline, in a project, through direct instruction, and so forth” (Horn and Staker).

The student not just individually develops one’s ability to interpret, analyze and evaluate things but comprehends things better, learning at one’s own pace.

“Every individual classroom should be seeking to implement sustaining innovations to improve what they currently offer” (Horn and Staker).

Colleges battling to find solution to upgrade students’ progress in academics can find relief by employing Blended Learning Modalities.

Binnendyk affirms that “Blended Learning is more than just a hybrid model of teaching, it improves and supports the teaching learning process”.

Implementation of Blended Learning in an ELT Classroom

The major threats that are posed in acquiring English as a language are psychological barrier and the language in itself seeming to be a barrier since it’s a second language. The individual either considers oneself inferior or restrains oneself from conversing being afraid of criticism. This psychological barrier which most of them face, could be rectified through Blended Learning. Blended Learning is where both the barriers are shackled. With an individual who is usually timid and shy initially finds it difficult to converse in English, in Blended Learning classroom atmosphere, the individual can be addressed to his/her needs through the motivation by the teacher in the class stating the teacher’s own vulnerability to model that perfection comes from having a growth mindset despite the odds. Participatory learning can be integrated through ice breakers, making the learning experience fun and impactful simultaneously. The teacher could also provide an alternate solution by asking the individual to practice speaking by recording oneself with the help of a gadget, while he/she is monitored, in case the student finds it difficult to face the audience initially. Binnendyk also asserts “Blended Learning has favourable influence on their independence and confidence in learning”. And hence with different modalities in Blended Learning, the student not only equips but also feels empowered to realize that acquiring a language is not a threat anymore, having great amount of confidence.

Vocabulary plays a prominent role in acquiring any language. Vocabulary is better remembered through Image Association. Human brain tends to capture memories through images, it can retain and recall easier when it is stored as visual information. When images are paired with vocabulary, the brain retains memory proven to have significant results.

“According to dual coding theory, visual, verbal, and sound sensory stimuli carried out at the same time maximally help foreign language learners to understand the learning materials and master the language forms” (Kanellopoulou et al.).

Image association can be initiated on various platforms, either through PPT’s, task cards, realia, cinema and so on. In a heterogeneous classroom, students are introduced to various methods and strategies to learn the vocabulary and hence there is no limitation to content and indeed it personalizes requisites of the mixed group.

“Another important issue is that vocabulary tends to be forgotten if it is not used through the right methods that will provide learners with language inputs in a genuine target language environment which leads to its acquisition. In this regard, the increasing access to different multimedia and technology resources facilitates spontaneous vocabulary acquisition for the contemporary age learners. In particular, films with subtitles can be a valuable tool in bringing students closer to authentic real-life vocabulary” (Kanellopoulou et al.).

Vetting of Cinematic Content is a holy grail, when the process is structured in a way to meet the objectives of learning a language. Vetting not just helps with vocabulary but can benefit in all four fields of language of acquisition. The analysis of the existing literature and experimental data substantiates that teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language using movies as teaching aids exhibit promising prospects for enhancing English language proficiency. The findings of the study reveal different genres of movies that aid the facilitator in producing effective instruction materials with clearly defined objectives and guided activities.

“It is also observed that the learners have a positive experience with long term learning benefits” (Pavithra and Gandhimathi).

It helps with active listening when the student pays keen attention towards the content. The individual gets accustomed to foreign accent and slowly is adapted to the pace, additionally the student is also exposed to a wide range of vocabulary and phrases. For students who initially find it difficult with the language, the content can be modified accordingly. For such students, movies with subtitles could be offered to initially help them attain the next level, the teacher should also make sure that the content doesn't overwhelm the learner. The student could also imply this for writing, the individual can present an essay with whatever he/she has watched and heard. On this note, the learner who is a slow bloomer, at least attempts to write. With students who find it hard to make sentences, the student can be asked to brainstorm with fellow mates and collect as much words as they can from others and write them down in a page or put words that they are reminded of into a paper and thereby the teacher can assist them in developing sentences with the given hints. The audio could be muted, and the students can practice reading the subtitles, while the teacher has a check on the clarity of the speech.

Similarly, for Speaking, the student can imitate the actors on screen trying to speak the dialogues, also after observation the teacher can initiate a role play to recreate the scenes. By doing so, the student learns phrases and sentences for everyday usage. The teacher should make sure that the content is situation based, based out of real-life scenarios which are highly beneficial from the student's perspective. Vetting of Cinematic Content enriches the student both on formal and informal communication. A follow up can be done by the teacher to ensure students understanding through assessments. In case of students of a certain group are unable to interpret through reading the subtitles or are unable to understand the context through listening, further activities held can provide them a clearer picture. The ultimate goal of Blended Learning in ELT would be to prepare the individual for the outside world, where the student gains confidence. The major problem faced by a teacher when dealing with a heterogeneous classroom is that not all individuals volunteer to speak, because most of them feel insecure to communicate and fear criticism. This fear which is obviously an emotion cannot be identified by any AI. AI can only assess based on the learner's performance or otherwise fetch materials that are required for study. Knowledge can be accessed, but language is learnt and therefore needs a mentor. Only in a classroom atmosphere, the individual is expected to overcome fear and break through insecurities by activities in the early stages of understanding a language. Through the traditional method, the teacher instigates structured approach, emphasizing on the accuracy the student needs individually, laying a strong foundation for the student to level up in the language.

Vocabulary is best learnt only when it is applied contextually. This contextual learning in the classroom helps the individual focus on the meaning and understanding rather than memorizing it. Movies and web series as they contribute in the mode of contextual vocabulary assist students in a way that even if they are new to the word, the individual initiates to connect dots and tries to trace the meaning with the given context. With listening to the conversation multiple times, the student learns sentence structure without being forced to learn grammar with rules. Blended Learning makes students fall deeper in love with the language. Language is inherited through listening; we imitate what is been told and heard most of the time. And that's exactly what I meant when I said, English has a different situation in India. Tracing back to the origin of English Language Teaching during the colonial period, the native teachers were not even graduates,

despite the language survived because of the imitation and English viewed as a language more than a form of subject in attaining intellectuality. In India, the reason why most of the students from rural and semi urban regions find it difficult to acquire the language is because it is only viewed at a subject point of view but not as a language, a change in the modality of acquiring a language can transform lives. With Blended Learning modalities the language can be inherited with accurate received pronunciation. Listening to Podcasts and apps like jolly phonics shall help the individual on a bigger forum to learn the pronunciation, nevertheless having a teacher to assess the individual in the Blended Learning classroom, helps the individual keeping the practice intact, as the language is better acquired of only when applied to practice. Only when the individual is exposed to different contexts with regard to the language, he/she will be actively using the language which helps in gaining proficiency. The teacher here directs you through the exact process without any digression.

Blended Learning environment facilitates interaction and communication skills among students which is essential for fluency. With the knowledge that the teacher holds about each student, the teacher plans her classes accordingly to make students interact. Flipped classroom, is one of the efficient modalities of Blended Learning, furthermore from helping the students interact also makes students comprehend lessons better, and wider their views on a particular topic. With discussions held post lecture, when students tend to reiterate their points in class for revision, the student who found it difficult earlier, understand lessons easier when paraphrased by another fellow mate. BlogSpot's are beneficial in several ways to several type of learners, with reading held in traditional classroom, the students are asked to upload the chapters that they have read in their blog spots of whatever he/she has understood. Through this modality, when Reading is enabled, a set of people are benefitted through reading, another through writing via uploading the content, and a few more with acquiring the information shared through blogs written in easy language.

To a student who has completed open schooling, Blended Learning, paves way to interaction, to a student from Tamil medium instruction, the learner begins framing sentences, to a CBSE curriculum exposed student his/her language is enhanced, and thus no learner is seen without any improvement. Each learner grows at its own pace in coherence with the subject and indeed with its classmates, taking a step at a time towards betterment together without hindering each other's growth. And hence nobody's growth is limited. In a heterogeneous classroom, especially with colleges in semi urban area, teachers are pushed to a situation to deliver classes in bilingual for better understanding of the audience. On such a notice, complete digital set up might not work. The student needs a teacher to simplify what has been taught online into better words to make it even more comprehensible. Blended Learning of some sort could be experiential as well, since the individual is in the process of reflecting upon what is done by him/her. With such experiences, learners tend to retain what is being learnt longer. Though AI could provide ample of information with regards to the content, you develop skills only with traditional way of teaching. Though communication could be taught, practice could be done virtually, non-verbal communication like presentation skill, body language, expressions, gestures which play a generous role in communication cannot be attained without the facilitator's assistance.

Language requires expression as much as it needs tone and intonation. These additional skills are also attained through Blended Learning as it collectively provides competency building. Initially students from diverse mediums find it difficult to adapt to a different curriculum. Blended Learning helps them ease and relieve them from their fear of learning a competitive second language. Students with English as their second language are usually phobic towards the language since they're not much exposed to it. Through active participation the individual begins to explore oneself and comprehends better when rightfully guided by the teacher. In Blended Learning a student avails the opportunity to practice with the software modules that help in enhancing the learner's fluency and confidence. AI has the leverage in helping the learner find better vocabulary and alternative phrases, but however students require a teacher to help them find the right source to flourish. It is indeed also difficult for the AI to evaluate students. A teacher evaluates students based on each individual's calibre, background and their improvement, but however AI could only

evaluate the student based on the fixated agenda but rather not on the improvement seen in the individual's progress. Progress differs with each individual and so does the learning pace. Irrespective of the pace, or the desired achievement, the learning methodology is effective only when it aspires to witness progress in an individual's learning. And Blended Learning is significantly one of the efficient methods to help students progress availing oneself with both platforms that remarkably contribute in language acquisition.

Methodology

To understand how Blended Learning has been influential among students in a heterogeneous classroom, a survey was conducted in a college at Tiruvallur, District. The survey was initiated to comprehend the response of the students towards the new methodology, reassuring if it had catered to their needs simultaneously helping them have a better exposure to acquiring the language at their own pace. The students were asked to select strongly agree, agree or disagree with respect to the given statements. 100 learners from different vernacular mediums, with diverse difficulties after experiencing the Blended Learning methodology for a semester, which included the integration of media, participatory learning, online and offline activities were asked to take up the survey. The aim was to acknowledge how Blended Learning has been efficient to learners with bare minimum exposure to English as well as how it had advanced the learners who were already at the intermediate level, assisting all the learners at different levels to progress.

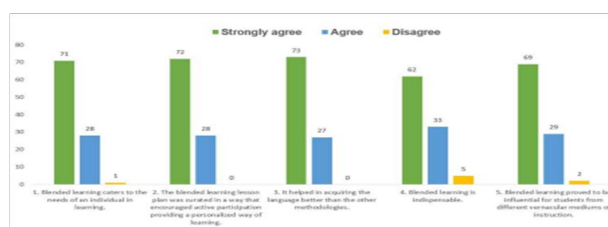


Figure 1 Survey on Blended Learning

The above data (figure 1) illustrates that 99% of the students strongly approved Blended Learning was impactful in acquisition of the language. Not many had disagreed to the notion of Blended Learning methodology. It is observed that students approve Blended Learning is indispensable in the current scenario and thereby 62% strongly agreed and 33% agreed that it has been influential for the students from different vernacular medium of instructions to comprehend better. And also, almost 98% of them agreed to the fact that Blended Learning has catered to their needs.

Conclusion

The survey explicitly speaks about how Blended Learning has been impactful among students. Almost all the students agreed to accept that Blended Learning has been effective. Through collaborative learning method, the student is prone to various activities helping them evolve and learn through the process. With the integration of media, the learner learns the sentence structure without any forced grammar lessons. The web series and movies being based out of various themes, the learner inherits the knowledge to make at least basic sentences that are required for everyday conversation. Media helps students acquire the language without any external or self-imposition, and also since it is a medium of entertainment, students are not easily bored but also learn in a fun and entertained way. It keeps them excited throughout the process. However, the student requires practice to rightly use the words in the sentence and to use it at the right conjecture. With the activities initiated by the teacher at class, the learner is given an opportunity to practice and rectify his/her mistakes.

Blended Learning acting as a student-centred learning, proves the fact that, though technology assists in learning, the learner still needs the teacher at various junctures. In a heterogeneous classroom, Blended

Learning is essential for a teacher to satisfy the needs of each and every individual according to their expectations, especially in helping them grow individually at all levels and still being able to deliver them all through a single method. Thus, educators can initiate implying the process of Blended Learning simultaneously to their existing teaching methodology, by introducing offline activities and later stepping up one's game by using media as a pedagogical tool, to adopt Blended Learning strategies to help students progress in acquiring the English Language.

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