

Review Article

Blended Learning to Activate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners' Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, technology advancement has changed rapidly. Learners become digital natives as soon as they are exposed to ICT and it impacts their learning. A traditional face-to-face interaction only may not fit the learners' profiles. Therefore, teachers should make use of ICT to support face-to-face interaction. In supporting face-to-face interaction with ICT, teachers may implement blended learning. Blended learning integrates the use of technology with the best features of face-to-face interaction. Hence, implementing blended learning encourages teachers to select teaching approaches that fit with the learners' current profiles as digital natives. Digital natives do not belong to any particular generations but they have grown up using technology. This paper suggests how the implementation of blended learning benefits foreign language learners to foster their learning autonomy. Learning autonomy is vital in EFL context. Without learning autonomy, learners study in limitations. That way, improvement will hardly be achieved.

Keywords: Blended learning, digital natives, English language instruction, learning autonomy

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, language learners have instant access to the Internet. Instead of getting information from printed resources, language learners often prefer to have digital information from the Internet. Studies related to preferences in using printed or digital media have been conducted in the past few years. Pierce (2009) finds that the use of digital learning resources

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is increasing, while at the same time, the use of printed learning resources is decreasing. Digital resources are updated daily. They can be accessed from anywhere and at any time. Thus, digital resources are accessible and flexible. Consequently, learners perceive that the Internet helps their learning and it makes things faster and easier. Simultaneously, when accessing digital resources; learners are able to obtain information from printed books, recorders, film, and other learning resources since digital resources contain not only words, but also pictures and sound (Sudiran, 2015). Therefore, today's language learners are often labelled digital natives, or the native speakers of the digital language (Prensky, 2001). Digital natives use technology such as computers, mobile devices, and Internet.

Learners' current profiles are characterised by distant and technology-mediated learning. Technology brings a shift on the way learners communicate, collaborate, and learn (Miller, 2009). Technology also offers more modes that enrich learners' learning experience (Rhode, 2009) so it is noticeable that they prefer learning with the assistance of technology (Cechova & Rees, 2013). Language learners' learning preferences should be taken into account. Teachers are encouraged to adjust the language teaching from face-to-face instruction to the one that makes use of technology, such as blended learning. Adjustment is required since learners' way of learning is not something static. Technology development changes the way education is perceived so it impacts

educational system and practices (Klopfer, Osterweil, Groff, & Haas, 2009). Without adjusting teaching methods to learners' profiles, academic success will be hard to achieve.

Blended learning is defined as a mixture of online and traditional face-to-face planned class activities (Kopecky, 2006). Gleason (2013) points out that blended learning can be beneficial for language learners. Learners take charge of their own learning with the support from the teacher. The teacher manages the learning environment and plans learning activities that allow learners to be autonomous. Implementing blended learning means both teachers and learners do not lose their autonomy since teachers can control the instruction and learners can learn on their own through online and computer-mediated activities. Tam (2000) finds that the fundamental benefit of blended learning is better learning flexibility. Outside the classroom, learners are allowed to independently determine the goal, content, pace and methods of their learning (Holec, 1981). Having the responsibility to take charge of independent learning fosters autonomy. Thus, blended learning suits learners' profile as digital natives and fosters learners' autonomy.

Blended Learning

ICT, which includes mobile and online learning, increases the opportunities for learners to achieve learning objectives. It helps learners to use a wide range of learning activities and resources. Blended learning is an effective learning strategy that integrates

the use of technology with the best features of face-to-face interaction (Krause, 2007; Singh, 2003). It is not merely about using technology because of its accessibility; it is about designing better ways of helping learners to achieve their goals and providing them with the best experiences; and it also includes supporting teachers to manage and administer the courses (Bath & Bourke, 2010).

Strauss (2012) states that blended learning is an approach when pedagogy unites face-to-face classroom methods with computer-mediated activities. By using computer-mediated activities, learners learn through visual information the way they prefer (Cechova & Rees, 2013). Teachers put learners at the centre of the learning process. Learners have the control over time, pace, path, and place of learning.

In blended learning, traditional face-to-face instruction is not replaced, but is optimised with the support of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Hence, in the implementation of blended learning, the teacher combines face-to-face instruction and e-learning. This combination aims to suit the learners as digital natives. Without combining face-to-face instruction with technology-mediated activities, teaching digital natives will be a big challenge (Chang & Yee, 2009).

As stated by McCown (2010), at the beginning of any blended learning implementation, the teacher explains how the course will work, sets the expected outcomes, and demonstrates the technology-

mediated activities. Following the face-to-face learning, learners learn through online activities outside the classroom. In these activities, the teacher monitors the activity continually and provides the learners with feedback. The feedback given can be in the form of correction or praise. Corrective feedback is effective for learners to understand the task better, while teacher praise is helpful to encourage a learner's potential (Norlin, 2014). In both classroom and online activities, the teacher is able to evaluate learners based on face-to-face learning, as well as online or technology mediated learning.

By combining face-to-face and online or technology mediated learning, the teacher does not dominate the instruction. Instead, the teacher encourages learners to govern their autonomous learning since they take charge of the learning process outside the classroom. Hence, learning autonomy can be fostered through blended learning.

Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning is commonly known as independent, self-directed, or self-governed learning. Autonomous learning happens when learners work on their own. They play a significant role in deciding their own learning directions, discovering their own resources, formulating their own problems, choosing their own courses of action, and evaluating the outcomes of that process (Healey, 2014). Learners become autonomous when they contribute to or involve in classroom activities and have

the capacity to control their goal, content, pace, and method of learning (Benson, 2006; Holec, 1981; Nunan, 1997).

Autonomous learners know how to improve their understanding since they will recognise when they need assistance. Moreover, they are able to monitor their improvement, as well as assess their achievement (Benson, 2003). As stated by Linn (1996), there are several traits of autonomous learners that teachers should encourage: 1) autonomous learners take accountability for their own learning. They decide the materials to study, to allocate time, and choose activities to accomplish the objectives. After selecting the activities, learners may experience difficulties and seek help to improve their independent learning; 2) learners know when to memorize, evaluate, and discuss material with a peer or a teacher; and 3) autonomous learners set realistic goals which they adjust based on feedback. Autonomous learners do not only set specific goals, but they also have certain ways to achieve the goal through their own chosen learning materials and activities.

By contrast to native speakers who innately acquire language, EFL learners learn through formal education. The use of the term learning shows the conscious learning process involving ability (Krashen, 1982). Hence, in the context of EFL education, learners should have the willingness and ability to promote their autonomy (Jingnan, 2011). Employing blended learning not only allows EFL learners to generate independent learning but also keeps pace with the development of technology.

The Practical Implementation of Blended Learning in EFL Class

In designing blended learning, teachers combine both face-to-face activities and technology-mediated activities. Face-to-face instruction is implemented in a situation when both the teacher and learners must be in the same place and same time (Black, 2002, p. 2). The teacher has the role to manage and determine the tasks and activities in the classroom. To support that face-to-face instruction, teachers can utilise several technology-mediated tools to enhance EFL learners' language skills and learning autonomy.

Technology-mediated media are commonly divided into two categories: synchronous and asynchronous communication tools. A synchronous enables real-time communication. Audio-video conferencing, instant messaging, Twitter, and Skype are some examples of synchronous social media. Both synchronous and asynchronous tools offer different benefits. Synchronous tools offer direct feedback. On the other hand, asynchronous media are not time bound (Perveen, 2016, p. 21) so learners can learn on their own pace at their leisure.

In the context of EFL classes, the teacher conducts face-to-face instruction in order to introduce new materials or activate learners' prior knowledge. As stated by Walpole and McKenna (2007), contents, process, and product are the bases to implement blended learning in differentiated instruction. Contents deal with the standards learners should master.

The materials given in classroom instruction are the basis for learners' independent learning by using technology outside the classroom. Meanwhile, process has to do with activities learners should perform. The learning activities in the classroom can be moved online through design of relevant digital materials. Thus, materials given in the classroom and digital materials are complementary. Once the learners perform the activities on certain content, they are allowed to demonstrate the product.

Listening Class

YouTube videos can be used as an aid in a listening e-class conducted outside the classroom where learners join by utilising digital media. Unlike a traditional listening class in which learners listen to an audio chosen by the teacher and answer listening comprehension questions, out-of-class learning as a feature of blended learning offers more learning flexibility to satisfy learner's different learning preferences and encourages their autonomy. YouTube videos include visual clues, music with lyrics, or other items that may help and motivate learners in understanding and performing the tasks (Balagiu, Zechia, & Patesan, 2016). In the process of face-to-face instruction, the teacher assigns the learners to small groups and plays a YouTube conversation video. The learners watch the video and pick up a few key points in the conversation. Each group presents the results of their subsequent discussion while other groups give comments.

For out-of-class activities, each learner chooses any conversation video. Individually, they listen to the video, find the key points, transcribe them, and edit the video with the transcript on it. To evaluate learners, the teacher checks the learners' transcription results. By allowing learners to choose any video they are interested in on the highest-trafficked web-based video platform, YouTube; the teacher fosters learners' autonomy since they take responsibility for deciding the learning resources themselves. Furthermore, learners' different preferences and different traits of learning can be satisfied since YouTube allows learners to learn the target language by continuously listening and watching videos of various styles and genres of language (Alimemaj, 2010).

Speaking Class

According to Brown and Yule (1983), speaking in the target language is regarded as one of the most problematic aspects of language learning. To lessen their burden, teachers are encouraged to facilitate learners' spoken English. Conference Call, one feature of Skype can be utilised to reinforce language learners who always encounter difficulties in speaking (Elia, 2006). Before joining a Conference Call, the learners are to practice speaking many times so that they will be well-prepared and feel less nervous. Moreover, both the teacher and learners should make sure the internet speed required to use Skype. It was found that to avoid lag, Skype Conference Call requires

128kbps/128kbps as the minimum internet speed (Lee, 2013).

Skype, as a synchronous tool, can be utilised by learners to develop their speaking skills. In contrast to Facetime and Google Duo, which offer a simple video call, Skype offers more features. Skype can be used to make telephone conference and video calls over the Internet to transfer files and chat (Sheppard, 2006). While engaging in Skype meaningful conversation, learners are able to interact, modify, and elaborate their input (Long & Doughty, 2009).

As learners are expected to be able to communicate in real-life communication, speaking has to do with authentic activities. Speaking practices in the classroom may not reflect real-life communication, so learners also need to learn in a different authentic learning environment. Ryobe (2009) found Skype as advantageous to develop learning autonomy, as well as intercultural awareness, the basis for communication. Hence, Skype can be utilised to encourage learners to communicate with communities. After the learning process in the classroom, the teacher asks the learners to discuss any topic through a Skype Conference Call with their peers. Learners will communicate with less effort and hesitation if the teacher allows them to prepare for their participation in every Skype conference. Moreover, by interacting with peers through Skype, learners practice two-way communication that enhances comprehension, as well as production. The peer discussion is used to foster learners' self-governed learning,

as well as to facilitate learners' real-life speaking practices.

Reading Class

In relation to learners' profiles as digital native, blogging can be utilised to enhance learners' reading skills. Blogging is an online medium and a computer-mediated tool that facilitates a learning community (Blackstone, Spiri, & Naganuma, 2004). According to Campbell (2003), there are three types of blog that are appropriate for educational purposes: 1) the tutor blog, 2) the learner blog, and 3) the class blog. The tutor blog is run by the class teacher who alone can post reading materials for learners. Meanwhile, the learner blog is run by learners. Each learner posts different materials for others to read. The learner blog is beneficial since each learner has control over time, pace, path, and place of learning. Unlike the tutor and learner blog, the class blog is run by the teacher and the learners collaboratively so that everyone has autonomy within the same blog.

Instructors can utilise the tutor blog to post supplementary reading in the form of whole reading passages or just hyperlinks. These passages or hyperlinks guide learners in their autonomous learning (Campbell, 2003). Learners are then able to write comments on the teacher's posts based on their reading comprehension. In addition, learners can share reading passages based on their interest through the learners' blog so that peers get more reading exposure. The learners' blog is effective to foster autonomy

since it becomes each learner's personal space. Each learner is responsible to decide on content subject matter and volume, and the time to publish (Lee, 2010). Autonomy is given to each learner to regulate their learning. With the class blog, either the teacher or learners can be the learning resource so that learners have a great sense of autonomy. There will be multiple learning resources since learners, collaboratively with the teacher, share reading materials to discuss (Campbell, 2003). Unlike learners' blog, the presence of the teacher in the class blog allows a monitoring process so that the materials shared are all appropriate.

Writing Class

Blog as one type of online and computer-mediated tool and as a learning platform is seen as an appropriate media in enhancing learners' writing competence through blended learning approach (Blackstone et al., 2004). In the traditional writing class, learners produce their writing in a piece of paper that can be shared only with the teacher or peer alone. Through the use of blog, the learners are able to share their writing logs to many readers at once (Wagner, 2003). The learners are also able to get feedback on their writing since there is an Add Comment feature so that both the teacher and peers can leave their opinions, questions, or thoughts. Moreover, as digital natives, learners prefer blog writing since there is technology and Internet involvement. To improve learners' writing skill, it should also be noted that encouraging learners to first read a lot on

others' blogs is needed since "the writing process followed a similar development to that of reading" (Tavares, 1990). The lower the reading skill, the lower the writing skill will be.

CONCLUSION

As digital natives, learners nowadays prefer learning through modes that are accessible and faster. Consequently, language instruction should accommodate the current trend by combining classroom instruction with technology-enhanced activities, or blended learning. Through the implementation of blended learning as the response to learners as digital natives, teachers are able to provide opportunities for learners to learn language outside the classroom by utilising technology.

In order to foster learners' autonomy by implementing blended learning, the teacher needs to involve learners into setting clear learning goals and determining learning activities, tasks and assignments. Once the teacher allows the learners to learn at their own pace and according to their preferences, learners will be autonomous. Autonomous learners are self-directed and are able to decide their own resources, and evaluate the outcomes of their learning process. Considering learners' current profiles as "digital natives" and the effectiveness of blended learning, EFL teachers should re-examine the way they teach language skills so that learning activities will better suit learners and foster their autonomy. Teachers are also expected to not only implement

blended learning to teach language skills separately but also to teach integrated skills and other language components.

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