

CURRENT RESEARCHES in EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

Editor

Assist Prof. Mustafa Batuhan KURT, Ph.D.



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●Chapter-1●

THE IMPORTANCE OF BLENDED LEARNING DURING THE PERIOD OF GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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Introduction

With the development of technology, the 21st century is known as the age of information and communication technology (ICT) “ or “digital age” or “information age” because technology has progressed at an unparalleled rate and has influenced every area of life, hence education. In today’s world, called the age of information and communication, radical changes are taking place in the lives of individuals under the name of “digitalization”. In the words of Friedmann (2006), “in our flattened world”, digital age technologies offer the opportunity to reach anything desired instantly, bringing the life standards of individuals to a different dimension. At the same time, it is becoming inevitable to keep up with this rapidly changing and evolving era. Digital technologies, which are in many areas of daily life, cannot be expected to remain outside of the education system. Technological materials and digital media seem to be becoming more and more involved in educational processes every passing day.

Educational environments have also been one of the areas under the influence of the digital age, and the convenience provided by technology in obtaining and using information in education has caused the understanding of education to gain a new dimension. These developments have led to the change and development of the education system, which is moving towards a constructivist approach throughout the world. Therefore, the diversity of the methods used by educators has become inevitable in order to make educational environments more interactive, to increase students’ motivation levels and to increase success rates. Although the digital age has affected individuals’ lifestyles, it has

also led to a decrease in the impact of traditional teaching and learning paths, especially on the new generation of students. Computer aided education platforms have started to be used due to the positive contribution of computers, one of the most important tools that support the learning and teaching process, on education.

21st century students who grew up with technology, which Mark Prensky (2003) describes as “digital natives,” are individuals who know and express themselves and their environment through technology and digitality. For decades, the principal mission of applied linguists and researchers in this area has been to develop better methods and techniques. Therefore it would be right to conclude that advances in English Language Teaching in recent history have accelerated. Language teaching in the twentieth century was marked by constant change and evolution and the emergence of often conflicting philosophies for language teaching (Richards & Rodgers 2001). It is seen that these students are at a much higher level in digital literacy compared to their parents and teachers. The most common tool used by these students, who contribute to their learning processes with the ever-changing and developing digital age, is the Internet. When the Internet and digital technologies come together, the importance of English, the common language of the whole world, increases. In this case, digitalization is made in the field of education in order to respond to the needs of the new generation students and to keep up with the era. With the rapidly developing technology and digital age, education and training environments have enriched and the concept of “Distance Education” has come to the fore, eliminating the limiting effects of time and space concepts as an alternative to face-to-face education.

Blended Learning through Digital Technologies

In recent years, it has been proven by some researchers (Ivy, 2011) that digital technologies integrated into foreign language education may have negative effects on both educators and students (Chen, Pedersen and Murphy, 2012), but carefully selected and correctly used digital media make foreign language education more interesting and effective (Ohashi, 2015). The main reasons for educators to integrate technological platforms into their lessons are; to ensure the active participation of students in the lessons and to keep their motivation, creativity and attention levels high; it can be listed as enabling students to learn by enjoying and providing them with a more effective and efficient educational environment (Balta & Tzavilkou, 2019). Studies on foreign language education integrated into face-to-face education around the world have shown that distance education offers students the opportunity to be involved in foreign language learning processes (Wang, 2015), without the restrictions of time and space, students are able to plan their own educational processes, it gives flexibility to learning processes because it provides instant feedback that shows offer the opportunity for continuous learning (White, 2003). In addition, it has been observed that digital applications within distance education contribute positively to foreign language learning processes so that students can evaluate their own processes, levels and preparedness (Karasu & Sarı, 2019).

According to Benson (2011), the use of technology-based approaches such as online education will enable the development of foreign language autonomy, which allows foreign language students to take control of their own learning processes. Moving away from the tradition-

al classroom environment and using computer-aided language learning programs brought about by the millennium age gives students the chance to reduce their dependence on teachers and take control of the process by following and planning their own learning processes (Karasu & Sari, 2019). Moreover, it is emphasized that distance education programs, which include information and communication technologies integrated into face-to-face education processes, enable students to become involved in learning processes by recognizing their own learning styles, stemming from a constructivist approach that adopts a student-centered approach (Eby, 2013).

In addition to integrating technology into education as a necessity of the digital age, it started to turn to alternative teaching methods that will increase efficiency in education due to the COVID 19 Pandemic that spread worldwide in 2020. Blended learning, in which online education and face-to-face training are applied together, is one of these methods. Friesen (2016) found that the word could mean almost any mix of technology, pedagogy and even job tasks in the early days of blended learning. Procter (2016) characterized blended learning as the compelling combination of distinctive modes of conveyance, models of educating and styles of learning. Graham (2006) notes that the true sense of blended learning is best expressed by the concept of blended learning as the combination of face-to-face instruction with online instruction. By combining conventional and online instruction, which provides learners with versatility, performance, and comfort, blended courses seek to build a modern learning experience (Stein & Graham, 2014). Face-to-face instruction and online instruction have existed in the past as two very different and separate

modes of instruction, according to Graham (2006); the first addressed the needs of learners in a teacher-directed context, while the second was used in self-directed learning environments. These two different styles are merged through blended learning. Neumeier (2005, p. 164) claimed that “the most important task of a design for Blended Learning is to find the most successful and efficient combination for the individual learning topics, contexts and goals of the two modes of learning”.

Blended Learning for Language Learners

In language teaching, skill development is an important area that should be surveyed to see the effectiveness of blended learning in language acquisition. On the one hand, as reported by Klimova (2008), blended learning provides language learners contemporary information technologies with intriguing teaching and learning sources, for example effectively available materials, instant feedback, flexibility in studying time and place. Traditional face-to-face instruction, on the other side, is a sort of requirement for practice and input in ability development, for this reason blended learning is the middle of the road approach. Also, many studies (Shih, 2010; Grgurovic, 2011; Adas and Bakir, 2013; Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour, 2017) have indicated that blended learning can be used successfully to improve the language skills of language learners. For example, reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of language learners may be improved by using blended learning rather than face-to-face or entirely online learning. Instead of traditional or online learning, blended learning can be used greatly because it facilitates a greater sense of interaction and community than traditional face-to-face or en-

tirely online teaching and learning approaches (Tayebnik & Puteh, 2013). Within the language instructing and learning setting, Neumeier (2005) given a system for planning a blended learning environment. This system comprises of six parameters that recognize the key components in planning a blended learning environment for language learning and teaching. These parameters are: integration model, distribution of the content and goals of learning, methods of language teaching, mode, association of learning subjects, and location. For language teachers, each of these parameters is critical to determine if blended learning can be incorporated into their teaching practices.

Moreover, Marsh (2012) noted that the use of blended learning could provide language learners with several advantages over conventional approaches to teaching. Some of these advantages include developing the autonomy of language learners, increasing the interaction and participation of students, offering more individualized language support, encouraging collaborative learning, providing opportunities for language practice outside the classroom environments, and enhancing language skills for language learners. Also, considering the contribution of a high level of motivation to language education blended learning enables further learning experiences to inspire students to engage in and beyond the classroom environments that Senffner and Kepler (2015) have found out that blended learning is a versatile, adaptive and meaningful way of language teaching and learning. In short, the online aspect of blended learning allows language students to learn wherever they prefer at any time without being restricted to groups. Besides, According to Riel, Lawless, and Brown (2016) blended learning environments provide language learners with on-

line and face-to-face places to meet, interact, and work on practical projects in language classes. Rhem (2012) pointed out that one of the distinctive aspects of blended learning is that it enables teachers to deliver classroom activities in two separate environments: in person and online. Additionally, participating in blended learning courses can encourage learners to improve other certain skills. King (2009), for instance, indicates that students taking blended courses have the ability to use digital media and learning skills of the 21st century to improve abilities in information literacy and critical thinking skills which have critical importance in language learning processes.

Blended Learning for Virtual Education

Knowledge has become the most important element that determines the competitiveness and development levels of societies in today's economy. In the transition to information economy, development of human resources by using information technologies in every field from education to health and lifelong education are of primary importance. While developing and changing technological structures enable the development of common solutions in global education, they also cause the expectations from individuals to increase rapidly and the quality of education to be evaluated within international standards (Erbarut, 2003).

New approaches should be used in order for student-teacher communication, which is the basic element of face-to-face education, to take part in virtual education,. Virtual education technology is developing rapidly to offer distance education as an alternative to face-to-face education. Thanks to the virtual education, students can complete the education program in a geographic location far from the center of the institution that provides education (Kayalar and Kayalar, 2018).

One of the main approaches in the distance education process is to reach the learning resources beforehand, to support the student's self-learning and to make them ready for the lessons. These resources can be pre-loaded reading materials, lecture slides, as well as pre-voiced presentations or video lectures. Here, the goal is for the student to come ready to attend the face-to-face discussion sessions or lectures to be held simultaneously in the classroom or remotely, and gain the maximum benefit.

In blended education systems, if all courses are to be held remotely and simultaneously (synchronous), it becomes difficult to use methods such as an inverted classroom that will help distance education items and similar technology to support learning. This causes a distance from coeducation. In remote simultaneous (synchronous) lectures or seminars, students might lose their concentration more quickly, shift attention and interest due to surrounding stimuli, inability to control the whole class on the screen, disconnection slowdown problems, difficulties in using the question-answer method, and similar reasons. . For this reason, it is recommended to plan two lessons in a day, followed by two lessons in 1 hour break.

Recommendations

It is recommended to associate synchronous lessons directly with a student activity in order to benefit from any synchronous asynchronous course applications to be made remotely. In applications to be synchronized over the Internet, the student must be ready for the lesson and the courses should be associated with student activities. In synchronous encounters, the topics should be reviewed with experts. It can be organized as a question-answer panel discussion session. Uniform narration of lecture slides should be avoided but for in exceptional cases. Lesson slides should be uploaded to the training system by voicing and

monitoring by students. Measurement and evaluation should be planned in a way that supports learning. Formative evaluation elements and multiple evaluation methods should be included. Student contribution and participation must be included in the assessment.

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