

# A review of the blended learning approach to curriculum

Zhang Xueshan<sup>1,\*</sup>, Wang Xiaolian<sup>2</sup>, Pei Shasha<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Humanity, Hongkong Polytechnic University, Hongkong, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Nanjing Forestry University, Nanjing, China

<sup>3</sup>Shanghai Huayao Baoshan Experimental School, Shanghai, China

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** Due to the breakout of the Co-vid 19, blended learning approach becomes one of the trendiest language teaching methods. However, there has been no consensus on its definitions, instruction methods and ways of class arrangement. Therefore, it is necessary for this essay to provide a complete synthesise of current studies to illustrate existing problems and future research directions.

**Keywords:** blended learning approach, definitions, instruction methods, class arrangement

## 1. Introduction

There are various definitions of curriculum proposed by different scholars, and it is arduous to have a clear idea about its vital factors<sup>[1]</sup>. It is the same as the syllabus, containing contents to be taught and sequences of contents from the narrow sense. From a broader perspective, it is the combination of the planning, implementation, and assessment of the teaching and learning process<sup>[2]</sup>. Kelly<sup>[3]</sup> suggests curriculum is more than the knowledge taught by teachers, and students also learn from the "hidden curriculum," which is related to the values and attitudes of the curriculum planner (P. 5). The curriculum definition is quite complicated because many different stakeholders are involved in curricula, such as students, teachers, parents, curriculum designers, and administrators. A well-planned curriculum should meet the needs of all stakeholders to a certain extent. Scholars have suggested many different curriculum approaches to meet stakeholders' needs and realize various educational goals. One of these approaches is the blended learning approach, which draws a lot of attention, and this essay reviews studies on this approach.

## 2. Literature review and critiques of the blended learning approach

More recently, educationists advocate a modern approach to the curriculum, named a "blended learning approach." Broadly the "blended learning approach" denotes the mixture of different things, such as diverse instruction methods, different teaching pedagogies, and a combination of classroom study and virtual space learning<sup>[4]</sup>. From this point of view, the meaning of blended learning is highly flexible, and it should not be confined to the mixture of online and offline. Hrastinski<sup>[5]</sup> stated that combining various teaching practices, including online learning and classroom learning, was called blended learning. Garrison and Kanuka<sup>[6]</sup> defined the blended learning approach as "the thoughtful integration of face-to-face learning experience with online learning experience" (P.96). Garrison and Kanuka<sup>[6]</sup> discussed the simplest blended learning model, which referred to teachers uploading text-based electronic materials through E-learning platforms before scheduled classroom teaching. Additionally, they suggested that the meaningful combination of classroom teaching and online teaching should take the advantages of face-to-face and online<sup>[6]</sup>. Staker and Horn<sup>[7]</sup> defined blended learning as follows: students should learn some of the instructions online and the other parts in the traditional classroom. Staker and Horn<sup>[7]</sup> suggested that this kind of curriculum could be implemented flexibly through different forms of mixtures of online instruction and face-to-face activities, such as small group discussions, collaborative projects design, private tutoring, peer-review activities. Oliver and Trigwell<sup>[8]</sup> argued that the term "blended learning" was not clear enough to some extent as it mainly meant the mixed modes of delivery of instruction and a combination of various pedagogies, ignoring learners' perspectives. There was a need to divert attention from the teachers' manipulating the blend to learners' diverse learning experiences. From the above discussion, it can be concluded that with the development of technology and the new approach to

curriculum, traditional ways of teaching, learning, and thinking have been changed a lot. People's studies are not limited to four-wall classrooms and scheduled times. Furthermore, it is possible that ways of learnings are more flexible and not moving as a block.

Staker and Horn<sup>[7]</sup> pointed out the following four modes of the blended learning approach to the curriculum: (1) Rotation mode refers to students' change between different learning modalities. Still, at least one of them should be online learning. The typical example of this rotation mode is a flipped classroom. A flipped classroom means teachers provide video-based instructions and text reading materials through the E-learning platform before classroom study. Students can decide the learning pace and time by themselves before face-to-face activities. Based on online learning, more opportunities are provided to have student-centered activities, helping students understand the knowledge in-depth by applying them to different contexts<sup>[9]</sup>. (2) The flex mode means that students have their customized learning plan as instructions and content are provided online. They can arrange their learning according to their interests and abilities. When students need any help and suggestions, they can turn to their tutors and consult their tutors face-to-face. (3) The self-blended mode can be seen as a way for students to find additional online courses based on their interests to complement traditional teaching. These additional learning materials are selected by students and help effectively improve students' independent learning abilities. (4) The enriched-virtual mode implies that students complete most parts of the subject content online, and they participate in classroom learning infrequently. This mode requires students to have a high degree of self-discipline and independent scheduling abilities.

Hrastinski<sup>[5]</sup> discussed three critical conceptualizations in the blended learning approach: quality, quantity, and synchronous conceptualizations. Quality conceptualization refers to the concern of the enhancement of the quality of the curriculum. As the blended learning approach is adopted increasingly, it is significant to assure this approach's favorable results. Garrison and Kanuka<sup>[6]</sup> suggested the thoughtful combination of classroom learning and online study to ensure this approach's positive effects. It is asserted that the reform program's teachers and leaders should carefully design the curriculum developed by the blended learning approach and keep tracking the approach's effectiveness from various aspects, such as students' attitudes and motivations, the learning outcomes of learners, and the learning process. Quantity conceptualization refers to the heated debate of how much online learning should be included in blended learning. Allen and Seaman<sup>[10]</sup> introduced that the proportion of online learning ranged from 30% to 79% for the blended learning approach. It is well recognized that the blended learning approach's teaching and learning activities are highly dynamic due to different subjects and specific contexts. Also, synchronous internet communication technology promotes synchronic remote teaching and learning, stimulating the increase of online proportion in the blended learning approach. Admittedly, at the initial stage of the Covid-19 breakout, students and teachers in China cannot access the campus. Therefore, all the teaching and learning activities have to be conducted through synchronous and asynchronous online communications. Suddenly, people realize the importance of virtual learning under these special circumstances. Teachers and students learn necessary technical skills in a hurry to adapt to the huge change. With the continuum of Covid-19, most academic forums and conferences are held online to provide more learning chances. Therefore, this pandemic greatly fosters online teaching and learning. Garrison and Kanuka<sup>[6]</sup> suggested that the "asynchronous internet communication" fostered the formation of a "community of inquiry" (P. 97). The inquiry community online promotes communication and collaborative learning activities between learners and teachers. Garrison and Kanuka<sup>[6]</sup> indicated that it was expected that most of the asynchronous communication was written, which was highly efficient, and it encouraged accurate expressions. According to Kanuka and Garrison<sup>[11]</sup>, there are three essentials for higher learning: the social presence, the cognitive presence, and the teacher presence (P. 4). To compare synchronous and asynchronous communication, the teacher presence and social presence are more robust in a synchronous way than in an asynchronous manner. Synchronously, people can talk and see each other in real-time, and teachers can verbally control the real-time course, which is clearer and more direct. At the same time, asynchronous communication provides students time flexibility. Thus, they can control their own learning pace.

Albiladi and Alshareef<sup>[12]</sup> reviewed empirical studies about the learning effectiveness of language teaching based on the blended learning approach. Some research showed that the blended learning approach yielded positive language learning outcomes. Adas and Bakir<sup>[13]</sup> pointed out that students acted passively without acquiring satisfied language skills under the traditional language teaching method. Teachers have a dominant position in the classroom and keep talking all the time. Students do not have opportunities to convert language knowledge into speaking and writing skills. Adas and Bakir<sup>[12]</sup> implemented an experiment to investigate the differences between English writing learning outcomes under the traditional and blended learning approaches. Sixty students participate in the study, and learners are divided into two groups: the experimental and control groups with 30 students each. The experimental

group was under the blended learning approach, and the control group was under the traditional method. Teachers organized an online activity of error analysis of students' paragraphs and the other two writing tasks supported by images and videos through asynchronous communication. Through the statistical analysis, Adas and Bakir<sup>[12]</sup> stated that a statistical significance of differences in the post-test results between the experimental and the control groups existed. Students improved their writing skills more progressively under the blended learning approach. Zhang and Zhu<sup>[14]</sup> researched the influences of the blended learning approach on English learning outcomes among 5376 students in a comprehensive university located in Beijing. Results indicated that students under the blended learning approach yielded better academic performances than students in the traditional method. Yoon and Lee<sup>[15]</sup> surveyed 47 university students to investigate students' second language writing effectiveness under the blended learning approach and students' attitudes towards the blended learning approach. Yoon and Lee<sup>[15]</sup> reported that students had positive minds towards the blended learning method through different data collection methods. Also, this new method has a positive effect on second language writing.

In summary, there are many advantages for learners to have a curriculum based on the blended approach. Learners with access to more resources can have their own choice for learning materials, time, and places. Additionally, learners can study more interestingly through different methods; teachers have more chances to provide their students private tutorials to find differences between students and understand individual students more; teachers can design various student-centered classroom activities to help students improve necessary skills. However, there are still many concerns about this approach. Following Betihavas et al.<sup>[16]</sup>, challenges for the blended approach can be summarized from three aspects: faculty challenges, student challenges, and operation challenges (P.19). Garrison and Kanuka<sup>[6]</sup> pointed out that a wide range of knowledge and considerable skills were necessary for teachers to participate in this new approach. Faculties who alter their traditional approaches to blended approaches have to spend a significant amount of time designing the course's online parts and offline activities. Concerning online teaching, they must acquire necessary technics to improve the curriculum qualities continuously. Besides, teachers face more expectational situations when they are online. Thus, they should be able to deal with emergencies. As the offline component is focused on student-centered activities, it is demanding for teachers to design and instruct students to participate in effective activities. Students bear more workload and sacrifice part of free time to complete pre-class online reading materials and videos. Therefore, when young learners cannot understand the necessities of changes, they resist change and act negatively. During the implementation process, the unstable Internet connection could detriment learning effectiveness. Besides, some learners have limited access to the Internet and electronic devices required for this blended learning. Furthermore, institutions must have financial resources to purchase a user-friendly e-learning platform and advanced equipment to launch new initiatives<sup>[6]</sup>.

### 3. The blended learning approach in practice

For mainland China tertiary education, this approach to curriculum is popular. More and more educationists believe that this curriculum approach is aligned with technology development and can better meet social development needs. Indeed, society nowadays has a greater expectation of the quality of higher education. High education institutions pay great effort to enhance international ranking to meet the anticipation of relative stakeholders. Practically, universities' authorities greatly support meaningful new initiatives to curriculum, such as this blended learning approach, paying more attention to improving teaching quality, meeting students' learning needs, optimizing students' learning experiences, and enhancing students' learning outcomes. In addition, new approaches to curriculum help teachers develop professionally. Teachers who successfully trial this new approach have more opportunities to participate in international academic forums on teaching reformation and obtain rewards, such as financial support and promotion. In conclusion, new methods for curriculum are embraced both top-down and bottom-up nowadays.

In reality, teachers adopt flexible models of the blended learning approach. Different teachers choose different models of blended teaching approach to curriculum according to their circumstances. Some teachers choose the blending of diverse locations. For example, some courses should combine classroom studies with library studies to allow students to apply the teacher's instructions about electing and reading journal articles into practice. Besides, some subjects are fit to merge classroom studies with historical museum studies to give students a better idea about the history of industrial development learned from the textbooks. Some others need the conflation of classroom study and factory visits to help students understand the production process. Other teachers choose the most typical blending mode, which relies on the mixture of partial online teaching and partial face-to-face teaching. Teachers with this mode use

an e-learning platform to upload pre-course materials, which helps students construct an overview of background information. These pre-loaded texts facilitate students' improvement in reading skills and comprehension abilities. After the online part, teachers organize group discussions and students' collaborative learning activities offline based on pre-reading materials. Other teachers prefer to combine asynchronous with synchronous online courses as well as the face-to-face private tutorial. Some others choose to combine synchronic online courses, which are for instructions, with face-to-face discussion and group activities to allow students to apply acquired knowledge. Other teachers are willing to teach within classrooms because they value the merits of face-to-face communication with a small proportion of online asynchronous written communication and group discussion.

However, there are still some teachers who oppose the blended learning approach. They argue that this approach is unfair for students who cannot afford various electronic devices and have limited Internet access. To address this problem, universities in mainland China conduct surveys to find out students with limited internet access and a shortage of electronic devices during the pandemic breakout. Then, additional financial allowances are provided to students to help them study. Teachers who argue against this approach point out that this approach is feasible for universities located in more developed areas where social and economic development can greatly support multiple blending modes. Concerning universities in less developed and remote areas, financial support from central and local governments for new initiatives is limited. It is difficult for these institutions to have enough money and staff to trial a new curriculum approach. Teachers at less prestigious universities with less financial support have suffered from an overworking load usually. Therefore, they cannot have enough time to conduct teaching reform and introduce a new approach to redesign current curriculums, which have been the same for many years. Besides, teachers suggest that some students have inadequate abilities to complete the pre-course tasks and participate in the classroom activities effectively from previous teaching experiences. These students find it challenging to participate in classroom discussions and are far from meeting teachers' requirements. To deal with this problem, institutions usually administer a placement test before implementing the new approach to divide students into different groups. Teachers should adopt different blending modes and assign learning activities of various levels to various groups. Obviously, it is demanding for teachers to participate in the blended learning approach to the curriculum. They need tremendous courage to break out of the comfort zones at the initial reformation stage. After that, in-service teachers need to continuously learn about various knowledge and skills to continuously redesign the blended learning curriculum to ensure its effectiveness and efficiency.

#### 4. Conclusion

As discussed above, educational reformers should have clear ideas about blended learning approaches' strengths and weaknesses. Different methods should be devised to address the thorny problems of this approach. Once institutions plan to adopt this method, a thoughtful plan and continuous quality monitoring are necessary. As is well known, education aims to develop learners' full potentiality and help them become competent learners in the long run. With the notion of life-time learning, the ability of independent-learning is crucial. The blended learning approach to curriculum provides learners more chances for independent learning activities and collaborative learning opportunities. These valuable learning experiences can also help students foster critical thinking abilities.

#### References

- [1] Van den Akker, J. (2003). *Curriculum perspectives: An introduction*. In J. van den Akker, W. Kuiper and U. Hameyer (Ed.), *Curriculum Landscapes and Trends* (pp. 1-10). Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- [2] Finney, D. (2002). *The ELT curriculum: A flexible model for a changing world*. *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*.
- [3] Kelly, A. V. (2004). *The curriculum: Theory and practice*. London: Sage.
- [4] Driscoll, M. (2002). *Blended learning: Let's get beyond the hype*. *E-learning*, 1(4), 1-4.
- [5] Hrastinski, S. (2019). *What do we mean by blended learning?*. *TechTrends*, 63(5), 564-569.
- [6] Garrison, D. R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). *Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education*. *The Internet and higher education*, 7(2), 95-105.
- [7] Staker, H., & Horn, M. B. (2012). *Classifying K-12 blended learning*. *Innosight Institute*.
- [8] Oliver, M., & Trigwell, K. (2005). *Can blended learning be redeemed?* *E-learning and Digital Media*, 2(1), 17-26.
- [9] Lo, C. K., & Hew, K. F. (2017). *A critical review of flipped classroom challenges in K-12 education*:

*Possible solutions and recommendations for future research. Research and practice in technology enhanced learning, 12(1), 4.*

[10] Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2010). *Class differences: Online education in the United States, 2010. Sloan Consortium (NJ1).*

[11] Kanuka, H., & Garrison, D. R. (2004). *Cognitive presence in online learning. Journal of Computing in Higher Education, 15(2), 21.*

[12] Albiladi, W. S., & Alshareef, K. K. (2019). *Blended learning in English teaching and learning: A review of the current literature. Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 10(2), 232-238.*

[13] Adas, D., & Bakir, A. (2013). *Writing difficulties and new solutions: Blended learning as an approach to improve writing abilities. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 3(9), 254-266*

[14] Zhang, W., & Zhu, C. (2018). *Comparing Learning Outcomes of Blended Learning and Traditional Face-to-Face Learning of University Students in ESL Courses. International Journal on E-Learning, 17(2), 251-273.*

[15] Yoon, S. Y., & Lee, C. H. (2010). *The perspectives and effectiveness of blended learning in L2 writing of Korean university students. Multimedia Assisted Language Learning, 13(2), 177-204*

[16] Betihavas, V., Bridgman, H., Kornhaber, R., & Cross, M. (2016). *The evidence for 'flipping out': a systematic review of the flipped classroom in nursing education. Nurse Education Today, 38, 15–21.*